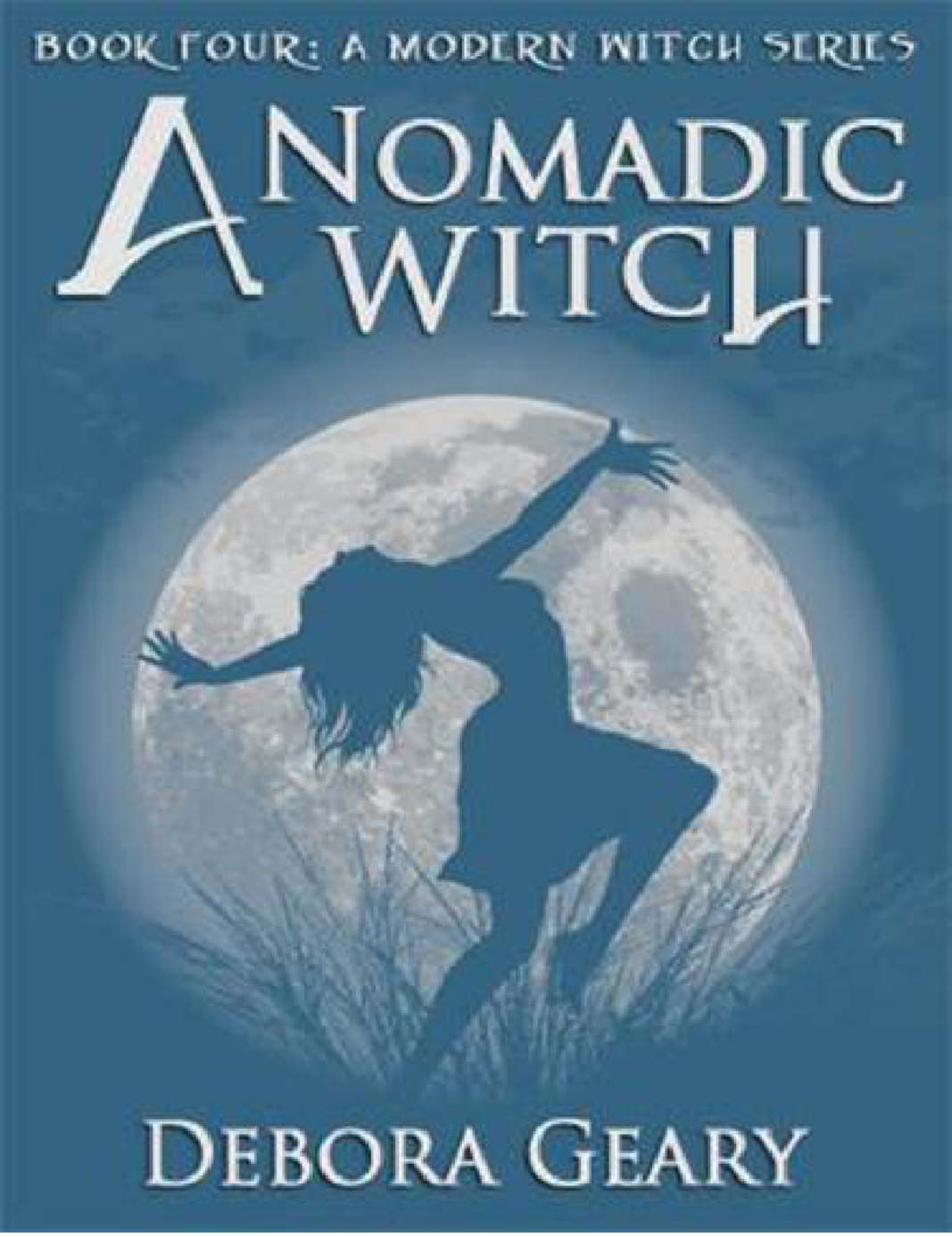
BOOK FOUR: A MODERN WITCH SERIES

A NOMADIC WITCH



DEBORA GEARY

SHOUT
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IT

Annotation

A Note from Debora: For those of you who haven't discovered my witches yet, I invite you to start with book one, A Modern Witch. Some series can be read out of order – this isn't one of them:).

For the rest of you who have been eagerly awaiting this release… happy reading – and thank you!

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Spring brings a traveler to Nova Scotia – a tiny babe who will turn Marcus's life upside down and reincarnate the horrifying events of his past.

Can Marcus find his way through the pain to love and healing? And can the witching community finally learn to keep their astral travelers safe?

A Nomadic Witch is book four of the top-rated A Modern Witch series. Light contemporary fantasy with a good dose of humor, a little romance, and characters you won't want to leave.

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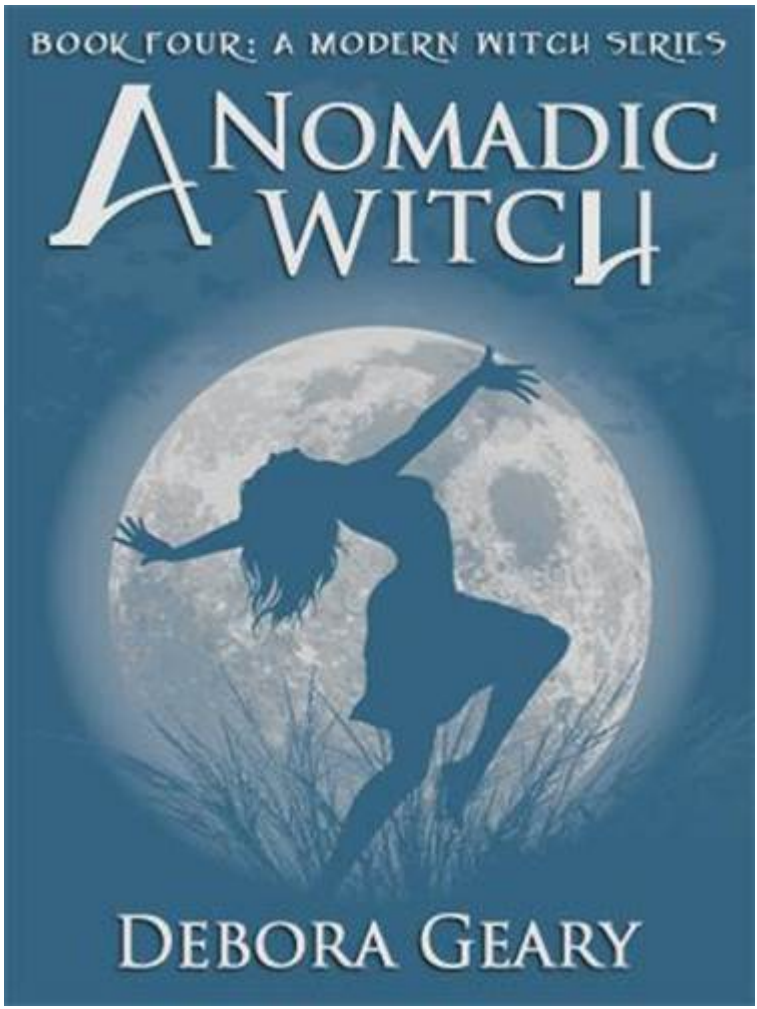
- Thank you!
- Debora Geary



Debora Geary

A Nomadic Witch

A Modern Witch Series: Book 4
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For Margie…
Who heard the first few chapters
while she was still with us-
and I trust is listening to the rest.

And for my
grumpy old men fan club…
You know who you are.

Chapter 1

Spring had come to Nova Scotia, and with it, the consequences of last summer's bout of contagious fertility. There were babies everywhere.

Which was why escape had been essential. A few hours of uninterrupted peace, under one of the first brilliantly blue skies of the year. A man, his fishing boat, and the open ocean. Perfection.

Unfortunately, it didn't appear that he was alone.

Marcus looked over at the cargo closet of his fishing trawler. It was fairly embarrassing to have a stowaway, especially when you were a mind witch with a reputation for being inhospitable. "You'll freeze if you stay in there all day." Cargo closets weren't very dry places this time of year.

Total silence.

The boy had been watching too many pirate movies. "The worst I'll do is make you swab the decks." Probably. Marcus shoved the friendliest mind-vibe he could manage in Sean's direction.

Another minute of silence, and then some scuffling. A couple of surprisingly eloquent curses later, a somewhat bedraggled eleven-year-old emerged from the closet, wet to his waist.

Marcus grinned. Sometimes karma had an excellent sense of humor. "Fell into a bucket, did you?"

Sean scowled. "It's dark in there."

There were several other boats still in sight. Marcus aimed away from the good fishing-it wasn't sea creatures he was after. "You might as well bring that bucket out with you." The decks could certainly use a good scrubbing, and Sean usually had energy to burn.

His stowaway grinned. "Can I sing pirate songs while I work?"

Marcus growled and stared out to sea, amused in spite of himself. Apparently he was doomed to child-sized company of some sort today, but at least this one wasn't still in diapers. "Where's Kevin?" Generally the twins traveled together.

"Babysitting for Elorie. Gran says he has the touch."

Marcus grinned at the boy's tone-apparently Sean shared his general distaste for wailing babies. Or maybe it was a little more complicated than that. A trickle of unhappiness swirled at the back of Sean's mind even as he got out the mop and bucket.

Sigh. A whole village full of meddling amateur psychologists, and the boy had come to him. They *all* seemed to come to him-hardly a day passed that small footsteps of one sort or another didn't invade his new cottage. Renting one on the outskirts of Fisher's Cove hadn't dissuaded them in the slightest.

If it wasn't Lizzie, Sean, or Kevin, or someone looking to pawn off a fretful baby, it was Aervyn, porting in for a visit.

Almost as if there were a conspiracy afoot.

Marcus tucked that idea away for further contemplation. Sophie and Moira were more than capable of harnessing an army of pint-sized minions in their quest to upend his life.

And so far they'd been very successful at keeping him sucked into the village, far away from his remote and very child-free cliffside home.

"Can I steer?" Small hands reached for the wheel, and a still-wet boy threatened to crawl into his lap. Marcus vacated his stool and activated a small wind funnel. It wasn't nearly as pleasant as a quick-dry spell, but neither of them were fire witches, and Sean could hardly hang around in wet pants all day.

Spring in Fisher's Cove wasn't *that* warm.

"Don't hit a rock." There weren't a lot of things to crash into in open waters, but Sean had a knack for finding trouble.

The boy sprang up onto the stool, at home anywhere on a boat. "You're going the wrong way for herring. Uncle Jonathan said they're running better over by-"

"I'm not fishing today." Or most any other day, but Marcus wasn't about to try to explain why he owned a fishing boat that rarely on-boarded an actual fish.

"Okay." Sean leaned over the wheel, eyes sparkling. "Can we race, then?"

The air caught in Marcus's throat. There had been another, much smaller boy who had loved racing the wind.

He and Evan had been the mighty storm-witch duo, pushing their father's fishing boat over the waters and scattering fish every which way. No one had ever minded-Evan's sunny laughter had been impossible to resist.

Even then, Marcus had been the dark, quiet one.

And Evan had raced into astral danger with the same glee in his eyes. Marcus had watched, screaming, as his twin danced his way into the lethal magic mists of astral travel alone and unafraid. And never

come back.

"We're not racing today." Marcus heard the harshness in his voice and watched Sean's face crumple. Damn. He just wasn't good with kids-of any size.

He patted the boy's knee in mute, awkward apology. It was a sunny day-no mists to be seen. "You dry enough yet?"

"Yeah." Sean hopped off the stool, subdued. "I'll go finish mopping the decks now."

Marcus waited until he was out of sight, and then slammed his hands down on the wheel. He'd just needed an afternoon alone-a few short hours away from cute babies and bright eyes and happy laughter and feeling like the killjoy of Fisher's Cove.

A few hours to sit alone with the hole in his heart that never seemed to heal.

But life seemed to have a way of making sure he didn't get what he wanted.

***

Nell crash-landed on a couch in the Witches' Lounge and took a deep breath. Sanity. Maybe.

Moira chuckled from her armchair and held out a plate. "Cookie, my dear? Looks like you've had a bit of a rough day."

Nell took three-she'd earned them. "Aervyn's doing his best imitation of a spoiled brat. I dumped him with Jamie and ran for the hills."

"It's hard for him." Moira slid over a cup of tea to go along with the cookies. "Kenna's stolen a bit of his thunder with all her magic tricks. It's not easy being upstaged by a wee babe."

The wee babe in question had tried to pull the moon down so she could take a closer look-and had caused enough tidal tremors to keep every weather witch in Berkeley very busy for two days. Including Aervyn, which was at least part of why he'd unleashed a class-four temper tantrum right before breakfast.

Nell sighed and picked up her tea. "I guess all kids go through this with a new sibling." Technically Kenna was Aervyn's cousin, but in Witch Central, that was a very loose distinction. "He threatened to *send* her to the moon yesterday if she wanted to see it so badly."

It scared her silly that he might be able to do it.

"He's had five years to be the baby." Moira smiled. "I believe you were only a little older when you threatened to mail Jamie, Devin,

and Matt to an orphanage in China."

Nell grinned-according to family legend, she'd punched air holes in a refrigerator box and addressed it in impeccable seven-year-old spelling. It had taken her mother a week to stop laughing and at least a decade to get rid of the cardboard box.

Nell had regretted not mailing her brothers off more than once in the past thirty years, but she took Moira's point. "Take away the magic, and he's just having a normal reaction to a new baby."

"Exactly." Moira's eyes twinkled. "And I'm glad Jamie's stepping in to help. It seems only right, and your son needs to know he hasn't been entirely displaced."

It wasn't an easy juggling act. Even with Aervyn's first years as practice, Kenna had Jamie hopping. "She almost scorched his eyebrows yesterday." Which seemed like justice, given that it was Jamie who had once taught two-year-old Aervyn how to make lightning. Inside. Under his covers.

Fortunately, Witch Central's fire brigade hadn't taken long to jump back into gear. Jamie had lots of help.

A small blur on the other end of the couch heralded Sophie's arrival. A wail said she wasn't alone.

Nell grinned-the babies weren't all loving Realm transport. She reached out her arms, happy to cuddle a boy who couldn't talk back. "Aervyn tried to smooth out the transport spell, but it doesn't sound like it made a lot of difference."

Sophie grinned and passed Adam over, his cries already tapering. "I don't know what's riling them all."

Net-powered taxi rides weren't proving popular with all the new little ones. Elorie's daughter, Aislin, had nearly deafened Realm the one time they'd tried, and her brother, Lucas, had been happy to wail in sympathy.

Which wasn't a problem for now-there were witches lined up for blocks waiting to beam to Nova Scotia to rock a baby or two. But it did have them all a little perplexed.

"When you're my age," Moira leaned over to peek at Adam, eyes twinkling, "you'll learn to stop worrying about the unknowable and just enjoy the sweet boy in your arms."

"Or the delight of empty arms." Sophie leaned her head back against the couch. "I swear, he was up every ten minutes last night."

Some babies slept like logs-others, not so much. Adam preferred his naps during the day and in motion. Fisher's Cove seemed to have sprouted new rocking chairs every time Nell dropped in to visit. But all the help in the world didn't make the sleep-deprived hours before dawn any easier.

"When you're my age," Moira looked sterner now, "you'll know

it's a silly new mama who turns down all the people happy to come rock him in the night for an hour or two."

Sophie looked discomfited-and a little mutinous. "We're trying a couple of sleep spell variations-Mike's been working on a new one all morning."

"Mmm." Moira winked at Nell. "It might be more effective to use it on yourselves."

Sophie chuckled, eyes still closed. "Sleep deprivation is normal for new parents. I keep telling myself that."

Nell looked down at the peaceful boy in her arms. It was hard to imagine that the cute cheeks and sweet downy hair belonged to a tyrant of the night.

However, people had said exactly the same thing about her triplets. She stroked his cheek, suddenly grateful for nights of sleep and kiddos that mostly restricted their trouble to the daylight hours.

The light in the room shimmered again, Jamie's gently programmed warning of a new arrival. Nell looked up, expecting one of her baby-crazed daughters-

And gaped.

***

Sophie opened her eyes-and wondered briefly if she was tired enough to hallucinate. She finally decided, given the shocked silence in the room, that she probably hadn't.

It wasn't every day a two-hundred-pound stranger draped in gold lamé dropped in to Witches' Lounge.

A piercing series of beeps blasted into the silence, jolting the sleeping babe into unhappy alertness. Nell, with the grace of long juggling experience, slid Adam into Sophie's arms and reached for her shrilling phone.

She scanned the alert-and then, with menace in her entire stance, got to her feet between Sophie and the intruder. "Who are you, and how did you get past our firewalls?"

"Relax, honey. I bring no harm to you or that sweet boy-child." Their visitor lowered herself into the nearest chair. "I'm Adele, seer of truths, and I come to bring you a message."

She looked over at Adam, and then up at Sophie, empathy in her eyes. "You will worry about him, but he will find his own way. Trust what you know, and fear not what you don't."

It was the kind of portent that might have sent chills up Sophie's

spine-if it hadn't been delivered by a woman dressed in enough sparkles to outfit a houseful of preteen girls. "That's the message you came to deliver?" She tried to keep the skepticism out of her voice-Nell needed some time to figure out how someone had hacked into Realm. And swiped a transport spell, no less.

"No, that one's a freebie." Adele's eyes danced with honey-gold flecks that matched her outfit. "Suspicious witches, are you? Evan thought you might be."

Sophie felt the bottom fall out of the room. Literally.

Forty-three years, and the loss of one five-year-old boy still trampled hearts in Fisher's Cove. The pain of a child ripped away by the most dangerous of magics-and the least understood.

It was Moira who found her voice first. "What do you know of our Evan?" Her words shook with pain.

"I know that he sends love," said Adele softly. "And he hurts for those of you who still mourn him."

Sophie tried to breathe. "Evan's dead."

"I know that, child." Adele reached over for a cookie, small rainbows glinting from her costume-jewelry-bedecked fingers. "I'm not one of those mediums who gets messages from the living."

"You've spoken with Evan?" The quaver in Moira's voice made her sound terrifyingly old.

Sophie looked at Nell, glad to see suspicion shooting out her pores. Witch history was full of charlatans claiming to commune with the spirits. Those who could truly do so were exceedingly rare, and generally very quiet about their talents.

Gold lamé wasn't quiet.

"I see you have a 1-800 number. You'll have a chat with anyone dead we'd like, for the low, low price of just $4.99 a minute." Nell looked up from her phone, eyes full of not-so-latent threat.

Most witches would have been gibbering in terror. Adele seemed not to notice. She stood and walked over to the table, reaching for the teapot. "A woman's got to make a living. And I'm a lot more useful to people than most of the quacks out there."

Adam squirmed in Sophie's arms, his eyes on the rainbows playing off Adele's fingers. Sophie had the sudden, irrational urge to hide him away.

"You have a message for us, then? From Evan?" Moira's eyes were flooded with pain-and hope.

Impossible hope.

And for that, Sophie was ready to dismember the gold-plated fraud in their midst. With a teacup. She handed Adam back to Nell and faced down their invader. "Don't you dare walk in here dangling cheap hope and stirring up pain just to make a buck or two." Power

streamed down her fingers, aching to hurt. To avenge.

It shocked her to the core to feel Adele's power heating up in response. The medium calmly held out a fire globe on her palm and floated it over to entertain Adam. "I have no need to prove myself to any of you. You want to be pissy, judgmental witches, you be my guest." Her eyes surveyed the room. "But I promised to deliver a message to you, and a fair amount of work went into getting me here, so perhaps you'd be kind enough to hold your fire long enough to hear me out."

"No." Sophie stepped forward again, fury pushing against her chest. Fire magic might make Adele a witch, but it didn't make her a medium. There hadn't been a decently strong channeler of the spirits in three generations. "We don't speak lies in this room. You have no right to be here."

"She does." Moira's voice was soft-the kind of soft anyone in Fisher's Cove knew as high command. She held up a hand, stopping Sophie's protest dead in its tracks. "I know you seek only to protect me, dearest girl-but this isn't yours to do."

Moira turned her head to Adele, every inch the proud matriarch. "I will take your message."

For the first time, their bedazzled guest seemed uncertain. "I was told to deliver the message to Marcus."

Moira's serenity didn't slide a hairsbreadth. "You'll not get to him. You talk to me, or you go."

The medium stared. And finally nodded. "There is a small traveler coming. A babe. Marcus is to watch for her. Her name is Morgan, and she is to be his."

Sophie felt parts of her brain beginning to melt. "Someone's trying to give Marcus a baby?"

A grin the size of Texas flashed across Adele's face. "Yup. Evan seemed fairly amused." She sobered again, a touch of uncertainty sliding back into her voice. "He said the girl-child was for Marcus, and no other. A matter of life and death."

"That makes no sense." On all kinds of levels-Sophie knew firsthand exactly how much Marcus disliked babies.

Humor chased across the medium's face. "Messages from the dead rarely do, girlfriend. He also said Marcus would find the missing soldier under the back steps of the church."

And then she was gone, the alarms of Realm wailing in belated alert.

***

Jamie parachuted into Realm, wondering just how his life had descended into total chaos before lunch. And hoped his sister wasn't in a mood to shoot the messenger.

Pulling open the door of the Witches Lounge didn't deliver any reassurance on that front. Nell pounced the second he set foot inside. "What happened-how'd she get in?"

He winced. "We don't know."

Yeah. That answer landed like a load of bricks. Nell just glared.

Dammit. Kenna had been pulling her middle-of-the-night fireworks tricks again, and three hours was just not enough sleep. Jamie tried to kick his brain into gear before Nell melted him with another Supergirl stare. "There are no traces of hacking. Not even a whisper. The first time our system detected her is when she popped into the room."

Nell's scowl would have scared a lesser man. "Hijacked transport spell?"

"Nothing activated, no raid on the spell library." That part he'd personally checked.

"Fine. We'll check deeper." His sister pulled out her computer, a wondrous machine covered in pink stickers and fire-engine art. "Do a trace-back on the logs. No one leaves zero fingerprints."

Jamie risked his life and stepped in the way of the Mack truck named Nell. "We checked. Top to bottom."

"My girls are good." Nell's fingers were a drumbeat of war on her keys. "But there are a few tricks they don't know yet."

Jamie sighed and tapped a button on his phone. Time to call in reinforcements. "It wasn't the girls running the traces-or at least, not most of them."

Nell's eyes flew up in surprise as her husband materialized in the room. "Aren't you supposed to be in New York?"

Daniel grinned. "Boring meeting. They won't miss me much."

Jamie was pretty sure showing a Fortune 500 company how you'd hacked their servers and made Donald Duck acting CEO wasn't all that boring. "Thanks for the help."

Daniel chuckled. "I remember what new-baby brain goo feels like." He looked over at his wife. "*I* ran the traces. There's nothing to find. I don't know how your quack got in, but it wasn't via code."

Nell's scowl was laced with confusion now, but it was still pretty fierce. "Someone invaded our turf, and the best hacker in the world can't figure out how she did it?"

"Oh, I'm pretty sure I can tell you how." Daniel stepped over and started rubbing his wife's shoulders. "There are only two ways into Realm. If she didn't code, then it must have been some hocus-pocus."

Jamie snorted. Someone had been spending too much time with Lauren, their resident witch skeptic.

"Adele isn't a Net witch." Nell's grin wasn't meant to be comforting. "I scanned her when she started pushing fire globes around. She's a weak fire witch-no Net power."

"Does your scan read spirit channeling?" Moira, silent until now, spoke quietly from the couch.

It was an unusual sight for Jamie to see his sister squirm. "No. But she charges people by the minute. Probably uses the fire globes for cheap parlor tricks to keep them paying."

"She wouldn't be the first witch to use smoke and mirrors to hide her true magic." Moira stroked Adam's head. "And she got in here. That tells us something, even if you don't want to see it."

Jamie stared, trying to follow the breadcrumbs.

"She comes in power. And I'm going to assume she deserves respect for it." Moira motioned Sophie over. "Take your sweet babe, my dear. I have a message to deliver."

There was dead silence as she poofed out of the lounge, witch matriarch on a mission.

Jamie tried to wrap his mind around what had just happened. Realm had the best firewalls code and magic could procure. And they'd been breached by a woman who worked for $4.99 a minute.

A woman who hadn't taken much longer than that to breach the defenses of the toughest old witch he knew-Moira was nobody's biddable messenger.

An odd sound escaped from the couch. Jamie looked over at Sophie, who was quietly giggling into her son's hair. She looked up, waving her hand in apology. "Sorry. I know we have some serious issues here, but oh, to be a fly on the wall of the conversation she's about to have."

Jamie blinked and tried to backtrack. In all the mad code checking, he'd mostly tuned out the audio feed from the room. Something about a baby. Or a soldier. But mostly stuff about Marcus's dead brother.

Daniel, who never missed anything, started to chuckle. "A baby in a basket, headed Marcus's direction."

A grin slowly bloomed on Nell's face. "A *girl* baby."

Jamie tried to imagine. And really, really wished he wasn't too old for a good eavesdropping spell.

Chapter 2

Marcus tried to find any vestiges of patience that an afternoon on the boat with Sean hadn't already obliterated.

Without success.

"You have a *what* kind of message for me?"

Aunt Moira pursed her lips. She didn't approve of his general grumpiness. "We got an unusual visitor in the Witches' Lounge today. She brought a message for you, from the spirits."

It was a particularly bad day when even the dead wouldn't leave him alone.

And his aunt's mind was oddly jumpy. Marcus gave up on his vain hope that the universe would disappear in a poof of dust and lasered in on the jumpiness. "What's going on?"

She reached for his hands, a sure sign of impending disaster. "The message is from Evan."

Evan. One word, and oxygen vanished from the world.

Marcus fought for the right to breathe, just as he had every day of the last forty-three years. "Evan is dead."

"I know, dear boy." Tears threatened to spill over in Moira's eyes. "But a special few can hear the words of those gone from us."

You didn't grow up in Aunt Moira's world without at least some respect for the more mystical magics. Marcus tried to keep his gruffness in check. "I wasn't aware that you knew any mediums."

"I don't." She shook her head slowly. "She was a stranger, sent to deliver a message."

From Evan. Marcus had spent most of his life trying to reach across the veil that kept his twin just beyond his reach. That a stranger had done it drove him to fury and guilt in less than a breath.

And then he breathed one more time, and reason kicked in. "A stranger showed up in Realm with a message from the dead? And you believe her?" He reached for Moira's mind. Politely-she'd always been hell on poor witch manners.

"Go ahead and look, my boy." Her voice was pure Irish primness.

“And then remember that appearances can be deceiving.”

Marcus looked. And then scrambled to clean up the brain melt caused by all the glitter and glitz. “*That’s* your visitor?”

“You’re a fine one to judge.” Moira sniffed and reached to put his kettle on the stove. “You dress like some ruffian my aunt Martha would have chased out of her kitchen with a broom.”

It had suited an afternoon on the boat, but Marcus knew better than to defend the simple black he’d worn for years. “And how would the legendary Martha have felt about your gold-spangled stranger?”

Point scored-his aunt’s cheeks glowed pink. “She was never one to ignore magic, whatever its outward countenance.”

All Irish common sense went out the window when magic was involved. Marcus scowled and pulled out some carrot sticks-normally they were pretty effective witch repellant.

Moira only raised an eyebrow. “Out of cookies, are you?”

No, but he needed the rest of his stash to chase away small visitors. Most happily departed with a cookie in hand. “Carrots are good for you. They improve your eyesight.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my eyes, Marcus Grimald Buchanan.”

Marcus knew that tone. It was generally followed by long hours of cauldron scrubbing. There wasn’t a witch in Fisher’s Cove dumb enough to argue with that voice.

His aunt stared him down, Irish warrior woman in full throttle. “I’ve been reading people for far longer than you’ve been ignoring them. Do you think I’d have carried you a message from some charlatan?”

It had never come up. He stayed silent. Talking only gave people reason to stay.

Her eyes saddened, and she reached out to touch his cheek. “I’ve not have caused you that kind of pain, my dear sweet boy. Not ever.”

Dammit. Moira in high dudgeon he could perhaps repel. The aunt who had rocked him for hours, saying nothing, for days after Evan had died?

Even he wasn’t that crusty.

He pulled her hand down from his cheek, giving it a quick squeeze before locking down his armor. “What was the message?”

“There’s a baby coming. A wee girl by the name of Morgan.” Not by an eyelash did Moira betray her unease, but he could feel it stirring in her mind. “She’s to be yours.”

Marcus stared. And then felt the most unusual sensation. Laughter, bubbling all the way up from his toes. “Someone escaped from Las Vegas to tell you I’m going to be a father?” Clearly an object lesson on trusting his first instincts-nothing that glittery could possibly

be real. “I can assure you, there are no babies out there with Marcus Buchanan genes.” He wasn’t entirely a hermit, but his recent life in Fisher’s Cove hadn’t exactly lent itself to clandestine encounters.

He got up to deal with the whistling kettle, wishing the whole day to hell. “Any other messages from beyond?”

“The dead don’t always speak clearly.” Moira, not taking the hint, reached into the cupboard for his cookie tin. “And there was one more bit about a missing soldier and church steps.”

The words hammered into his lungs. Marcus bent over, clutching the counter, vaguely aware that the dropped kettle had smashed a teacup to smithereens. Pink and green shards floated in front of his eyes, a terrifying gray haze sliding in to enfold his brain. The mists had come for Evan. Now they were coming for him.

And the part of him that would have been glad to go vanished in an onslaught of fear.

***

He was coming round. Sophie eased out of her healing trance slightly-Marcus was a strong mind witch, and he wouldn’t appreciate the invasion once he was conscious enough to feel it.

She looked over at six-year-old Lizzie, competently handling healer’s assistant duties. “Nice job on the monitoring there, sweetheart. What did you notice?” All moments were teaching ones, even when a perfectly healthy adult had collapsed while drinking tea with Aunt Moira.

Lizzie frowned. “It’s like Gran, but different.”

That was interesting. Lizzie had served countless hours as nursemaid when Moira was recovering from her stroke. “What do you mean? Different how?” One of the healer trainee’s more difficult tasks was learning to put words to things vaguely felt in scans.

Lizzie’s face screwed up in thought. “Well, the hurt is in his head, just like Gran’s, but there’s nothing really there. It doesn’t start anywhere-it’s just kind of all over. With Gran, we healed the hurt spot, and she got a lot better.” She looked down at Marcus, who was stirring now. “We can’t heal his whole head-it’s too big and grumpy.”

Sophie hid a grin-truer words were never spoken. “Sometimes when we aren’t sure what happened, it’s best to ask the patient.” She directed a light flow of energy into the healing trance. Time for Marcus to wake up and face the music. The fairly limited music-they’d cleared the room.

Some patients appreciated waking up to a room full of love. Marcus was not one of those patients.

When his eyes finally opened, the pain in them nearly knocked Sophie over. And then it eased-locked behind the impenetrable wall he always wore like armor. She felt the healing trance disconnect, lopped off by the strong mental will at the other end.

Marcus growled, the kind of hungry-bear sound that would have had most six-year-olds running for the door. Fortunately, Lizzie was made of sterner stuff. She patted his cheek and gave him a glare that would have done Moira proud. “Lie still while the blood finds your head or you’ll just end up lying on the floor again, and Uncle Aaron says you were heavy enough to carry the first time.”

Bright spots of red popped up on Marcus’s cheeks. His eyes zinged to Sophie’s. “What happened?”

Some things weren’t meant for little ears, even ones preparing for important responsibilities. Sophie put a hand on Lizzie’s shoulder. “Go send Gran in, lovey-and then if you could make up some of my chamomile tea, that would be helpful.” She leaned in and whispered, knowing it would take a good bribe to separate Lizzie and her newest patient. “You can doctor it up with anything you’d like from the bottom shelf of my herbals.”

She grinned as fast feet flew out the bedroom door. The most potent remedies were well out of Lizzie’s reach-but plenty of lovely and vile stuff inhabited the bottom shelf. Good practice for a budding healer-and an excellent threat if Marcus didn’t prove cooperative.

A good healer needed to be skilled with both carrots and sticks.

She looked back over at Marcus, who glared at her with well-deserved suspicion, and smiled. “I suggest you recover quickly.”

He snorted. “That would be easier done if I knew what the hell happened.”

Moira slid in the door, showing none of the hand-wringing fear she’d been wearing like a cloak when Sophie first arrived. She sat in the chair beside the bed, never taking eyes off her nephew. “It seems the medium brought you two messages-one I understood, and one I didn’t.”

Sophie felt the terror raking Marcus again-and wondered what on earth had just crashed into Fisher’s Cove.

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Moira watched her nephew, the scar tissue in her heart aching at

the haunted fear in his eyes. They'd never truly been able to reach the devastated five-year-old boy who had watched his brother vanish into the eternal mists.

She remembered when they'd found him standing on the cliff's edge just outside the village, screaming Evan's name into the wind and holding more power in his hands than most adult witches used in a lifetime.

It had taken months to heal his seared magical channels. His heart, they'd never been able to touch. They'd lost Evan to the awful power of astral travel-and she often thought his twin's heart had gone with him.

Just as she'd done for more than forty years, she reached out with love. And prayed that one day it wouldn't be turned away. "Tell us what happened."

His scowl wouldn't have scared a newborn mouse. "You delivered a message of nonsense from someone dressed like Lizzie last Hallow's Eve."

Lizzie had been a green caterpillar last Halloween. Moira sighed. Every battle had its time and place. "Nonsense wouldn't have landed you unconscious on the floor or broken one of my favorite teacups."

"Spew enough garbage and something's bound to be true." Marcus waved his hand in weak dismissal. "It reminded me of something, that's all. If someone will bring me the teacup's remains, I'll see that it's repaired."

Idiot. Moira looked at Sophie-it was always good to check in with the healer before you hammered her patient.

Sophie nodded. Hammer away.

"You great, clodding imbecile of a man." Moira let her Irish free. Not that it ever managed to dent Marcus's hard skull, but it would make her feel better-he had scared her silly crashing to the floor like that. "I'm neither fool nor patsy, and you'll be telling me what you know about soldiers and church steps or I'll be putting that frying pan of yours to another purpose." It was a heavy cast-iron one-she'd added it to his kitchen herself.

It was a good and proper rant-the kind that put snap back in her nephew's eyes and color in his cheeks. "I'm not a small boy anymore. I've a right to the privacy of my own head, and I'll ask you to leave now and take this noisy gaggle of witches with you." Marcus stared pointedly out the window.

He'd always been able to punish with silence. Moira felt the scars rip anew-and fought against the tears. They wouldn't help her now. Or him.

It shocked her to the core when Sophie reached out, healing power turned on full force, and drilled an angry palm into Marcus's

chest. “Is this the crap everyone’s been taking from you all these years?” Electricity snapped in Sophie’s eyes and ran straight out her fingers. “You take love when you want, and send it to hell the rest of the time?”

Marcus fought, sheet white, against the power streaming from her hands. Moira watched in horrified awe as the most talented healer she knew walked perilously close to an unforgivable line.

And finally stopped. Sophie sagged in her chair, energy drained from her hands. “She loves you, you old fart, and so do most of that noisy gaggle out there.” She pulled herself up to standing, shades of the old woman she would one day become. “I don’t really have any idea why. It would be more pleasant to love a field of thistles most of the time.”

Sophie’s voice carried a sadness Moira had never heard-one that could only have come from touching a broken heart deeply. Healing always came at a price.

Marcus only stared, cheeks as white as those of his healer.

On legs shaking like reeds in the wind, Sophie headed for the door. “Tell her about the soldier. Or I will.”

“You read my mind?” Marcus’s rasp sliced at the air in the room.

“No.” Sophie shook her head, clinging to the doorjamb for support. “I read your heart.”

***

What had the witch done to him? Marcus leaned back against the pillows, feeling his guts still spilling through the hole Sophie had punched in his heart.

And tried to fight the memories swirling in his head.

The toy soldiers had been contraband-a black-market trade with one of the other kids in Fisher’s Cove. Mom had believed in non-violent toys for her boys. Dad had laughed and called her “his hippie witch.” Evan and Marcus had just learned to hide their precious soldiers carefully and well.

Under the back steps of the village church.

He looked over at his aunt, watching him, her eyes full of sympathy and demand. They’d always been such, even when he’d been a fractured little boy carrying the guilt of the universe on his shoulders.

She huffed out a sigh and reached for her tea. “When you were little, the threat of cauldron scrubbing often got you to talk.”

It had. He'd also become the youngest witch ever to master a copper-burnishing spell. "Threats don't carry much weight with me anymore."

"Mmm." Moira wrapped her hands more comfortably around her cup. "So, should I be telling the village elders there's a soldier buried under the church?"

Amusement slapped oddly against Marcus's ribs. Evan would have loved a mystery and a dead body, and the chance to ruffle the calm waters of Fisher's Cove. "We had a set of six toy soldiers. After Evan-" He stopped, all traces of humor fleeing. "I could only find five."

And dammit, he'd searched high and low under those church steps.

"Ah, I remember." Moira's smile tinged with sadness. "Your mother let you play with them in secret, against her better judgment. They made you happy."

Nothing had made him happy-but they'd helped him to forget for a while. Given him somewhere else to look while the light in Mom's eyes had slowly gone out.

He'd barely been out of boyhood when his parents moved to Florida, land of sunshine and golf tees.

"They were wrong, you know." Moira reached for his hand, her grip strong and sure.

Mind barriers had never kept her out. Marcus shrugged, the ache old and dulled by time. "They wanted to forget." Easier to do away from the gray mists.

His aunt's eyes snapped. "They lost one son. They chose to let go of the other."

And for all the days he'd hated her for it, she'd never been willing to do the same. He met her gaze, for once wanting her to know what she meant to him. "I wasn't easy on any of you."

"No, you weren't." Moira's fingers touched his cheek, whisper soft-and then her eyes began to dance. "And for penance, you can drink the concoction young Lizzie carries up the stairs."

Blasted healers and their witch brews. "I should have made a run for it while I had the chance." If his legs hadn't still felt like a close cousin to spaghetti, he'd have been long gone.

"You've never been quite fast enough." His aunt's grin blossomed as footsteps reached the top of the stairs. "Drink it all up, and I might bring you a nice bit of tea with whiskey."

"I'm not a small boy who needs bribing."

"No. You're a man who needs his strength. You've a message to consider."

His brain was less wobbly now. The dead didn't speak-and they didn't talk to escaped infomercial actresses. Someone had simply

gotten lucky.

He didn't have to look to feel Moira's eyes piercing his head-she'd always been able to do that, too. And her Irish was back to full strength. "Sometimes messages come in strange packages. It doesn't make their contents any less important."

She had a special talent for making him feel like a small boy again-and a badly behaved one. "You think Evan reached across forty years to help me find a toy soldier?"

"No." Her voice was drizzled with the sense of humor that was one of her greatest gifts. "But you could start there."

Right. He'd get on that-right after he dealt with whatever vile concoction was about to walk through his door. Lizzie's mind practically overflowed with glee-and the whispers outside the door suggested she had company.

His kingdom for a remote cave.

Chapter 3

“Did Uncle Marcus really break Gran’s favorite teacup?” Sean grinned at Lizzie, eyes hopeful.

Sophie, inventorying her herbs at the kitchen table, chuckled quietly. He was hoping for someone to displace him as Aunt Moira’s current favorite cauldron scrubber-leaving his toy snake collection in her hot tub hadn’t been his smartest move ever.

“Uh, huh.” Lizzie was puffed up with the importance of the bedtime story she had to tell. “And then he fell on the floor and didn’t move for hours and hours. Or at least ten minutes.”

Kevin looked up from his book. “Minutes aren’t as long as hours.”

Lizzie brushed off irrelevant details. “Uncle Aaron had to carry him to his bed, and he says he’s not feeding Uncle Marcus any more blueberry scones.”

Sophie tried to keep her giggles quiet-that bit was news to her. Lizzie had very good ears and a storyteller’s flare for the right details.

“He’s going to be hungry as a bear when he wakes up, though.” Their small teller of tales grinned. “I sleep-spelled him.”

Lizzie’s spell had been strong enough to knock out a giant for a week. Not that Marcus had allowed it to hit him, but they’d have to work a little more on dosing-her talents were growing exponentially, and that required more care on the spell volume.

“So what was the special message?” Sean was whispering now, and Kevin’s nose wasn’t in his book any longer. Sophie kept hers studiously pointed at the herbs-she was curious what her pint-sized assistant had picked up.

Lizzie reached for another cookie. She was still reveling in the unlimited-cookie access that came with her healer role. “It was kind of spooky. Something about a baby and a dead body under the church steps.”

Sophie rolled her eyes and made a mental note to have Marcus test Lizzie for mindreading again.

“The church steps?”

Sophie looked up at the odd tone in Kevin's voice. He and Sean both seemed distinctly unsettled.

"Yup." Lizzie nodded sagely and scarfed down the rest of her cookie. "Uncle Billy watched a movie once where they hid a body inside a freezer and somebody ate it on accident, so it's probably smarter to put it under a church."

Sophie grimaced and scratched Uncle Billy off her future babysitter list.

"Eww." Sean looked anything but revolted. "You think Uncle Marcus would eat a body?"

"No way." Lizzie grinned and blew bubbles in her milk. "Gran says he's an awfully picky eater for a witch."

"He likes carrots," Sean said with disgust.

Sophie choked back more giggles. Marcus's dietary habits ran to a lot more salads and crunchy vegetables than did your average resident of Fisher's Cove.

"What was the part about the baby?" Kevin handed Lizzie a napkin-he had plenty of experience with milk-bubble incidents.

"Dunno." Lizzie shrugged. "I heard that a baby might come to live with Uncle Marcus, but that can't be right."

Twin heads nodded in agreement-nobody in their right mind would give a baby to the village's most crotchety bachelor.

Sophie stared at her stock of chamomile, wondering. Adele had looked like everyone's idea of witch fraud-but her eyes had spoken of truth.

And she'd busted into the Witches' Lounge on some kind of trail that Jamie and Daniel couldn't follow-all the gold lamé in the world couldn't manufacture that kind of stealth.

"It's a mystery," said Lizzie solemnly.

It certainly was. Sophie sighed-and then looked at the jar in her hand in disgust. It most definitely wasn't chamomile. The label said so, but chamomile wasn't purple. She hadn't made a mistake that basic in twenty years. Rule number one of a healer-never mess with herbs while distracted.

Or excited.

Sophie paused-she wasn't the only witch who'd been playing in the herb supplies lately. Or the one most likely to make beginner mistakes. Time to see how well their youngest healer knew her plants. "Lizzie, come help me organize my jars. I think we've got a bit of a problem here."

Lizzie bounced over. "That one's gentian. I used it in Uncle Marcus's tea."

It was indeed gentian-and his insides would be stained purple for a year. Sophie was a little afraid to ask. "And why did you put it in his

tea?"

The grin was pure trouble-and irresistible. "So he'd have purple poop."

Sophie tried not to laugh, really she did. And then she gave up and made another mental note. One about not making pint-sized witches mad.

***

He was an idiot. A full-fledged, fairy-tale-swallowing idiot.

Marcus leaned against the corner of Fisher's Cove's only church building, his legs none too steady just yet. Lizzie had obviously been more concerned with the taste of her putrid concoction than its actual healing properties.

And with Sophie watching, he hadn't dared tip it into the nearest plant. Earth witches got unreasonably mad when you killed their green leafy pets.

Well, wobbly or not, these were the legs he had. Time to get on with business. Marcus pushed off the wall, cursing the looming hints of old age. It wasn't the first time he'd crept through a dark night toward the church steps, but his legs had been far steadier the last time.

It was his mind that had been shattered then.

He'd come every night for weeks after Evan had gone, hoping against hope that he'd find his brother under the steps, waging epic battles and offering a sunshine grin of greeting. Night after night of hoping until the word "dead" had finally seeped into every corner of his soul and blown out the candles of happiness and wishful thinking.

He hadn't been back since.

Shaking with memories, Marcus edged toward the steps. They seemed so much smaller now-a crawlspace, not the castle fortress of two small boys. His hands reached out, fumbling in the darkness, looking for a board left loose for forty years.

Youch. Forty-year-old boards had some vicious splinters. Nursing a finger inside his mouth, Marcus pulled a small flashlight out of his pocket. The board hung slightly off-kilter, just as it had when two marauding pirates discovered it all those years ago.

Evan had wanted to pry it loose so they could make people walk the plank-and then they'd discovered the world hidden behind it.

The world clearly not meant for adults. Marcus twisted his shoulders through the opening, grimacing as his shirt caught and tore.

He might let Sophie take a splinter out of his finger, but he wasn't letting her near his chest again anytime soon.

Frustrated, he grabbed on the cloth and pulled-the faster he got this over and done with, the sooner he'd be tucked back in bed with whiskey and a good book.

Pulling his knees through, Marcus crouched just inside the small cavern under the steps-and gaped. Flung back in time, his fingers reached out for the pile of shiny rocks. Treasure, painstakingly gathered from the beach. They'd been working on Mom to let them "borrow" her sewing chest.

Evan would have managed it eventually-Aunt Moira had called him her Irish sweet talker.

Marcus picked up a green rock. In the daylight, it would gleam with flecks of gold-and the scorch marks where one determined fire witch had tried to melt the rock and mine the treasure within.

Hand clutched rock-and a wave of grief slammed his heart, raw and fresh. He shouldn't have come.

Heedless of the close confines, Marcus turned to leave-and saw the swords. Not the tinfoil and cardboard of his boyhood. Fancy made-in-China plastic with flashing lights and *Star Wars* stickers.

He knew those sabers. Sean and Kevin had loved them mightily two Christmases past. Even grumpy uncles occasionally gave decent gifts.

It had almost been worth the week of swirling nightmares they'd caused-full of swords, evil gray mists, pirate battles, and a brother long gone.

Evan, alive only in his dreams.

And now their lair had been invaded by a new generation. Throat still raw with unshed tears, Marcus reached out to put the shiny rock back on the pile. The boys could keep their treasure. He ran his fingers over the stones one last time, a benediction of sorts.

And then his hand brushed plastic. Mental mists threatening, Marcus hissed into the dark-and dug for the small toy hiding in the rocks.

One toy soldier, consigned to ignominious burial under a pile of shiny pebbles. Marcus clutched the small green figure and hurled a single howl of grief out into the night.

And then, with the wrenching practice of four decades, he locked it down. Pushed away the mists and the grief and the aching crevice that ran the length of his soul.

Hands steady now, Marcus laid the soldier back on the rocks. Perhaps he'd give Kevin and Sean the other five, tucked in their shoebox mausoleum in the back of his closet. Grown men had no need of toy soldiers.

The splinters didn't dare bother him on the way out. No blood left for them to find. He emerged from behind the board and stood, slightly dizzy and blinded by the moon's brightness. Long past time to go.

It was a short walk to his cottage, even tucked away on the edge of the village as he was. He was getting far too comfortable in Fisher's Cove. Maybe the soldier was a reminder-pain grew in the soil here. He needed the long, remote beaches of his cliffside home.

Ha. He hadn't been there in months. Every time he turned to go, there were witchlings or cookies or Aunt Moira's unwavering eyes. Always another creeping tentacle holding him here, trying to make him forget the pain.

Or trying to make him remember it.

Perhaps the dead of night was as good a time as any to leave.

Marcus thumped up his walkway, wondering where the hell he'd left the keys to his Jeep-and nearly fell headlong into the front door. Bloody Hecate, always tripping him up. The creature could damn well stay in Fisher's Cove. He looked down for the cursed cat-and froze.

Two shiny eyes looked up at him.

And then the thing in the basket stirred-and ice closed over Marcus's heart.

***

Such giggles. Moira held tight to the fleeting laughter as the vestiges of her dream slowly leaked away. She knew those giggles, even if decades had passed since they'd rung in her world.

Evan and Marcus. Light and dark, the two of them-and they'd wrapped the entire village around their fingers the day they were born. Evan, a born leader with mischief in his heart, and his twin, the thinker.

Sean and Kevin often reminded her of the boys who had once been.

Memory floated in now, mixing with the giggles of dream. More had been lost that horrible day than Evan's light. The oldest of magics had come for their beautiful boy-and left behind terrible mystery and heartrending loss.

And giggles that came only in dreams.

Moira reached for the bedside lamp. Old women had trouble going back to sleep, and this dream had carried weight. She'd go fix some tea and sit at her table and remember. *Evan, my boy, you left us*

far too soon.

And try as they might, they couldn't heal the twin who missed his light.

She let the tears come. There was magic in tears, just as there was in tea and remembering.

***

Even in tiny Fisher's Cove, it wasn't all that unusual for someone to pound on the healer's door in the middle of the night.

Sophie cuddled into Mike, trying to find the part of her brain capable of waking up-and hoping the noise didn't wake up Adam. Elorie's twins slept through anything, but Adam was a whole different story. Maybe they could rig a soundproofing spell for their bedroom.

"I'll handle it." Mike dropped a kiss on her head and swung out of bed, speaking in whispers. "You sleep."

Her husband was a good healer. Heck, six-year-old Lizzie was a good healer. Surely they could make do without her for one night.

Unless it was Moira again.

Wide awake now, Sophie reached for her robe, and heard Adam squirming in the bassinet beside the bed. Damn.

"I'll handle it." Mike's brown eyes drilled into hers, self-designated protector of her sleep. "It's not Moira-you'd know."

She would-she laid a light healing scan in place every night, even though her husband frowned at the energy it cost her.

Adam's noises got louder. With a sigh, Sophie grabbed her baby sling. The rocking spell on the bassinet was sheer genius, but even it couldn't keep her little seedling asleep most nights. It was hard not to be jealous of Elorie's bright eyes and four consecutive hours of sleep at a time.

Sophie shook her head, chuckling quietly. Anyone jealous of the easy life of a mother of two-month-old twins needed to have her head examined. Aislin and Lucas might sleep well, but they kept everyone hopping the rest of the time.

A couple of small adjustments to the sling, and Adam settled in happily. He'd stay that way as long as she kept moving. Time to go see what the fuss was about.

Singing a soft lullaby, she headed out of their back rooms toward the front door-and frowned. The voices at the door were male. Mike, and… Marcus?

Her steps hastened, healer brain snapping into place. "What's

wrong?"

Marcus, pasty white, held out a basket. "I found this on my porch."

Sophie moved closer. Gingerly. Given the look on his face, it couldn't be pretty.

The last thing she expected was pink cheeks, a head of riotous red fuzz, and the most gorgeous deep-lavender eyes she'd ever seen.

Sophie reached out a finger, enthralled. And then froze as gold-lamé-clad messengers and reality collided. Oh, God. A baby.

Her eyes shot to Marcus. Fear and denial coated every stark inch of him.

Tired mamas and smart healers didn't beat their heads against that kind of brick wall. Not without reinforcements. Sophie smiled down at the baby one more time-and dodged down the path of least resistance. "She's beautiful. Bring her inside where we can get a closer look at her."

Marcus stood, frozen to the spot. "Take her." His rasp belonged to a headless horseman.

Even tired mamas weren't that dumb. Sophie waved a quiet hand at Mike, who headed for the door. Time to wake up some backup. She patted Adam's bottom, checking that he slept quietly in his sling. "I only carry one baby at a time. Come on inside."

With the experience of a healer long used to reluctant patients, she shepherded the mostly catatonic Marcus into the living room, still holding the basket out at arm's length as if it contained a red-haired, lavender-eyed bomb.

Maybe it did.

"Set her down here, on the table." Sophie looked into the bright eyes. Just what they needed-another night-owl baby. She reached out a finger again, this time adding a light healing scan. "Hello, beautiful. What's your name?"

"Morgan. There's a note." Marcus had backed away to the far corner of the room. Sophie hoped Mike was quick.

"That's a big name for such a little girl." Sophie kept crooning nonsense, mostly for Marcus's benefit. A tie, however tenuous, holding him in the room. "And healthy, too." The first levels of healing scan showed a perfectly healthy baby girl, about three months old.

The physical covered, Sophie shifted to scanning the magical. Her hands moved with the automatic ease of something done thousands of times-and then tripped into dynamite.

Holy hell.

Sophie spun around, one arm cradling Adam tightly. "She's covered in magic."

He nodded, wordless-and now she understood his fear.

A lavender-eyed bomb. Sophie stepped away, mama bear protecting the child in her arms.

The rasp from the far wall bruised her ears. “I’ve shielded him. Adam. She’ll do him no harm.”

More carefully now, Sophie traced magical lines. Yes, Adam was shielded-as was every other little one in Fisher’s Cove. Marcus the recluse had a very soft spot for the tiny and weak.

He moved a step closer into the room. “The magic isn’t hers, or at least, not mostly hers. Is it safe to drain it?”

Cripes, she hadn’t even made it that far. So much for being the calm presence in the room. Sophie reached out again to bright lavender eyes, this time with a fully barriered scan, and tried to contain her unease. The aura of power around the tiny girl was supernova bright to magical sight-and Marcus was right. Most of it wasn’t hers.

Time to wake up more than Fisher’s Cove.

***

Nell shook off the still-weird feeling of a Realm transport spell and caught her daughter by the shoulder. “Easy, sweetheart-Mike said it wasn’t an emergency.”

Ginia stopped trying to run and rubbed her eyes, adorable in jeans, a single bunny slipper, and one of Aervyn’s T-shirts. She’d been asleep in her brother’s bed when the all-healers alarm had sounded. “They need my help, Mama.”

Nell bent over and slid the second bunny slipper on a small foot, trying not to resist the adult-sized weight that came with her daughter’s talents. “I know, love. Here, have a cookie.”

“Aunt Moira has cookies too, you know.” Ginia’s eyes were brighter now, her sense of humor waking up along with the rest of her brain. “But none of them are as good as yours.”

If cookies were all you rode with into battle some days, they’d better be damned good ones. Nell took her daughter’s hand. “Let’s go find the troops, shall we?” They’d beamed into a very quiet cottage, so clearly the action was elsewhere.

They’d made it about three steps into Moira’s garden when Lizzie came flying down the path, eyes glowing. “Ginnie, Ginnie! Uncle Marcus has a baby girl and she’s cute and her name is Morgan and we have to untie her magical stuff and Sophie says maybe Net magic will help but we should be careful. Come on!”

Nell, well used to translating small-child communications, relaxed. Whatever it was that had called them here, it wasn't life-threatening-for all her exuberance, Lizzie took healing very seriously.

And then the details of her babble hit. Marcus. A baby. Magic.

Oh, shit.

She grabbed both girls' hands. "Where is everyone, Lizzie?"

"At Sophie and Mike's house. That's where Uncle Marcus brought Morgan, and he woke Adam up and everything."

Nell winced-Adam was a touchy sleeper. "Who else is there?"

"Just you guys. And Gran." Lizzie squiggled through the fence at the end of the garden. "We're not supposed to make a big kerfuffle cuz it's the middle of the night."

Ginia hopped over the fence, bunny slippers and all. Nell grinned as she used the gate-she'd been a fence-hopper too, once upon a time.

"Oh." Their small guide stopped, forehead wrinkling. "And I woke up Elorie even though Aaron said that it better be really important or heads would roll." She put her hands over her ears. "I don't know if heads would roll very well-they're kind of bumply."

Yikes. Nell moved the girls along more quickly. Anything that involved waking up the sleeping mothers of small babies edged into emergency territory. Her programmer brain was also starting to come online. Elorie's only magic was Net power-and if Sophie was awake, maybe it wasn't Ginia's healing powers they were after.

They filed into Sophie's house. The worry in the room would have hit Nell hard-if the basket on the table hadn't already gotten her full attention. It practically glowed radioactive with magic.

Elorie turned, face taut with effort. "I don't think it's Net power. Similar, but I can't see enough of the threads to untangle it."

Sophie never looked away from the rosy-cheeked baby. "Is it fire power, Nell? We know it's not water, air, or earth."

Not any fire she'd ever known. "No-but it's one of the most complex spellcasts I've seen in a long time."

The relief in the room was palpable. Marcus shifted off the wall. "You can see the threads? Can you undo them?"

Nell studied the intricately woven lines. Given three days or a full circle, maybe. "What's it doing?" Unraveling a spell was dangerous work-doing it blind was insanity.

"Some of it's a barrier." Marcus stood beside her, magically pointing.

Nell frowned. "You can see it now?"

"I tapped into your thoughts."

Which normally would have earned him a serious kick in the shins, but given the circumstances, she'd give him a pass-his spellcasting talents were second only to hers. She looked where he

pointed. “Yeah, okay, I can see that. A three-layer barrier-one inside, one out, one figure eight.”

Figure-eight barriers had made Nell the premier spellcaster of her generation. They kept magic stable without a caster-and there were only three other witches she knew of who could set them reliably. Her brother, her youngest son, and the crabby witch standing beside her. Analyzing more quickly now, she slid past the barrier lines. “And a hell of a protection spell.”

“Double-sided.” His words were calm as glass-his mind anything but. “Protecting us as well as her.”

Nell was no stranger to babies who could rock the planet with their magic. She focused on the rest of the spell-and the small baby in the basket began to wail. Loudly.

Two hands slid into the basket before anyone else could move, soft Irish murmurs doing their age-old job.

And the spell evaporated.

Moira turned around, Morgan tucked into her arms. “Evan would mean us no harm. The wee girl is hungry. Let’s see what we can do about that, shall we?”

Nell stared at the space above the baby’s head. Not five seconds ago, it had contained enough lines of magic to blast Fisher’s Cove to Mars. “It’s gone.”

She could feel the same shock in Marcus’s mind-and then felt it double as Moira held out their tiny guest.

Marcus stepped back, horror radiating from every pore. “I’m terrible with babies.”

Moira simply settled the baby in his resistant arms.

He glared at Nell with something akin to begging in his eyes.

There was no running away from destiny. Five years of being Aervyn’s mother had tattooed that onto her soul. She shook her head, feeling a large spurt of sympathy for the man destiny now targeted. “Sorry. She wasn’t sent to me.”

Chapter 4

They said that a man discovered his true friends in his greatest hour of need.

Marcus stood in the middle of the gravel road that served as the main street of Fisher's Cove, looked around at the emptiness, and tried to will his panic away.

Apparently he had no friends.

They'd handed him the baby, a bag of supplies, a couple of cookies. And then Aunt Moira had patted his cheek and sent him on his way. He presumed the cookies were for him.

The small bundle in his arms wiggled. Hecate's hells. It was the middle of the night-didn't babies sleep?

A small fist squirmed out of the blanket and started waving in the general direction of Marcus's face. He tucked it back inside and cursed as a foot emerged instead. Sophie's sausage-wrap contraption was rapidly coming unglued.

He had a second to form misanthropic thoughts about octopus babies, and then her face started to scrunch up. He felt the wail before he heard it. She looked like a baby bird, pink mouth gaped wide in loud search of sustenance.

Food. Baby birds needed food. Marcus juggled the bag on his shoulder, desperately seeking anything that resembled a bottle. His fingers brushed against a ridiculous number of mysterious objects. He had no wish to discover what the cold, wet, squishy things were. Or the jingly ones. Or why he needed two tons of supplies to last until morning.

Surely someone would rescue him in the morning.

He struck bottle gold just as the creature in his arms dialed up her volume several levels. He took one suspicious look at the enormous end-that fit in a baby's mouth?-and shoved it in the right general direction. Hopefully she'd know what to do with it.

She mouthed the bottle with interest, the half-second of quiet music to his ears. And then let loose the hell of a baby scorned.

Ye gods and little fishes. Marcus glared at the bottle-he'd seen them work, dammit! What was wrong with this one?

The business end of it still looked wrong.

And the child was still wailing like he'd shot her in the kneecaps. *Quiet, girl-child-how do you expect me to think with all this racket?*

Perfect. Now he was mindyelling at an infant.

A very quiet, very still infant. Purple eyes watched him in utter fascination. Amused in spite of himself, Marcus reached for her mind again. *You can hear me this way, can you? It's a much more civilized way to communicate. None of that screeching, all right?*

He'd have sworn her mind felt vaguely amused. Which was preposterous-babies understood simple mindsent emotions, nothing more. Probably just gas.

Marcus looked over at the bottle again. And noticed the clear cover disguising something that looked far more likely to dispense milk.

Baby bottles had caps.

Gods. Clearly the designer hadn't been holding a wailing baby.

If he survived the night, that someone was going to get a piece of his mind. Presuming he had one left. He flicked the cover off the bottle and watched it roll down the street in disgust. Fantastically bad design.

And be damned if he was going to scrounge around in the gravel and dark for a piece of plastic.

This time, baby met bottle with happy sucking sounds. Which made him weak-kneed with relief-he wasn't entirely sure returning to Sophie's door would be met with any response. Aunt Moira had decided the baby was his, in the tone of voice that no smart witch in Fisher's Cove ever ignored.

He'd tangle with his aunt in the morning-and the rest of the witch hive mind. After they'd all gotten some sleep.

He juggled bag, bottle, and baby until it seemed safe to attempt to walk. "Just you and me, kid. Time to go home."

Her bright eyes were half closed now, her hands and feet pushing softly against his chest. Marcus pulled down his mental barriers as the leaking bliss in her mind touched his. She was happy-no need to intrude.

He ignored the small, impertinent voice in his mind that wanted to kiss the top of her head.

Marcus Buchanan didn't kiss babies.

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Moira leaned back from the window, well satisfied. “That was a lovely bit of work, ladies.”

Nell chuckled from the sofa, Ginia sound asleep in her lap. “That was pretty mean. The man’s hopeless with babies.”

Aye, he was. “All the better to keep his mind off the rest of it, at least until morning.”

Sophie was still jiggling, walking Adam back to sleep. “She’s stopped crying-he must be doing something right.”

“He found the business end of the bottle.” Which would probably keep their wee Morgan satisfied for a few hours at least. Moira smiled at her granddaughter, falling asleep beside Ginia on the couch. “It’s good Elorie had some milk to spare.”

“Between us, we can probably make enough milk for one more.”

“That’ll work until Marcus figures out what’s in the bottle.” Nell snickered again-quietly.

Her nephew was rather squeamish about the whole process of breastfeeding and babies. Silly man. He’d been perfectly fine with it as a wee one cuddled up for food, his legs all tangled with Evan’s.

Evan.

The sadness flooded into Moira’s heart again. Her sweet Irish leprechaun, full of tricks and mischief. Apparently some things hadn’t changed in forty-some years. Sending obscure messages from beyond the veil was one thing. A baby wrapped in magic was an entirely different level of prank.

She shivered. Or maybe not a prank at all. Morgan was a name of portent, one wrapped in the deepest roots of witch history.

A hand touched her shoulder. Sophie, with Adam finally sleeping. “It can wait until morning. Go get some rest-tomorrow’s not likely to be easy.”

Sleep wouldn’t come soon this night. “We can handle one wee girl.”

Sophie’s eyes carried hints of warning. “She’s not ours to handle. We don’t even truly know if she’s meant to stay.”

Ah, the young-so suspicious of the old magics. They’d trust an email in a heartbeat, but not a simple missive from the dead.

“We need to try to trace her parents. I’ll get Jamie and Daniel on that first thing in the morning.” Nell shifted carefully on the couch, pulling out her phone-and then grinned at the screen. “Never mind-they’re already on it. Jamie’s tracked down Adele. Apparently we’re going to Las Vegas tomorrow.”

Well, an outfit like that likely hadn’t escaped from rural Vermont. “Treat her with respect, my dear. She touches large magics, even if her own powers are weak.”

“Oh, I’ve got plenty of respect for her. She cracked Realm security.” Nell’s eyes sparked with both steel and momentary humor. “The only other guy ever to do that is *not* happy right now.”

Men always took such things as a personal affront. “I’ll trust you to stay focused on the more important questions, my dear.”

Nell looked confused.

“We have a wee new blessing in our midst, and if we’re to believe Adele’s message, she was sent.” By a small boy with shiny blond curls and mischief in his eyes. Moira looked out in the general direction of her nephew’s cottage, wishing him well in the night. “It isn’t *how* she got in that matters most-it’s *why*.”

The old magics were back in Fisher’s Cove-and *why* mattered. Desperately.

***

Very gingerly, Marcus slid the sleeping bundle in his arms toward the basket. Three inches to touchdown.

Two…

Hecate’s hells. Brain jarring with the infant’s wails, Marcus snatched her up, none too gently. And swore she stopped mid-howl to grin at him. *Brat. It’s a perfectly good basket.* One that some helpful soul had left in the middle of his living room floor, presumably to house his uninvited guest. He’d seen Elorie’s babies dozing at Moira’s feet in ones just like it.

The child in his arms was having none of it. Three times now, he’d waited until she was a limp noodle, deep in sleep. And three times, she’d woken, shrieking, a hairsbreadth from success-like she had basket radar.

He stared down at purple eyes, already sinking back into sleepy bliss. And cursed. *I’m not standing here holding you all night, girl-child. We grumpy old men need our sleep.*

She wasn’t listening. Already he knew the small whiffling sounds that meant she’d gone under, headed to the land of whatever babies dreamed about.

Carefully, he backed over to the big easy chair in the corner-his one furniture purchase since moving into the cottage on the edge of the village. The rest of the cabin had been furnished out of the spare parts trotted over by small children and fishermen. Clearly, no one had trusted him to outfit his own living space.

The sudden yearning for his cliffside home caught him by

surprise. No garage finds or mismatched teacups there.

And no mysterious baby girls with knowing eyes and opera-singer lungs.

She stirred as he settled into the easy chair, the neurons of distress lining up in her mind. Desperately, Marcus tried to jiggle her little body in the movement that seemed instinctual to all of womankind.

Her restless wiggles accelerated. Clearly he wasn't a woman.

His body begging for just a few more moments in the chair, Marcus began to croon, a tuneless melody that seemed to come from the night air. Slowly, words seeped into memory.

"O sleep, my baby, you are sharing
With the sun in rest repairing…
Sho-heen sho…"

Thus had Moira always sung to the babies in her arms. And for this small girl, like all the rest, the words were Irish magic.

Blessing whatever goddess had first invented lullabies, Marcus shifted carefully in the chair. It wasn't an easy job, wedging a large man and a tiny baby into some semblance of comfort. Holding his breath, he dislodged the small toes that had somehow wedged in under his ribs. There. That just might do it.

Tucked into his arm, wispy hair tickling his chin, the child wiggled one more time-and then let out a belch that belonged to a linebacker. Marcus choked back his bark of laughter. Waking her now would be pure lunacy.

Slowly, he laid his head back against the chair-and rejoiced. Still at last. It seemed like an excellent place to close his eyes.

***

Jamie pushed away from the mammoth table that acted as Realm's command center, shaking his head as cracking sounds ran up and down his spine. Nat would not be pleased-ten hours at a computer desk was bad for karmic energy flows.

And it made your butt numb.

He looked over at the only other member of his team who was still awake. "Find anything?"

The scowl on Daniel's face was plenty of answer. Jamie looked down at his code again-he'd run every tweak on Nell's scans he could think of. Time to stop banging his head against virtual bricks.

They had answers-they just didn't like them.

Rustling sounds from the couch had them both looking, but it was just a pint-sized set of toes seeking warmth. Jamie grinned as Mia shifted in her sleep to make room for his heat-seeking baby. All the triplets loved Kenna, but his most fiery niece was by far the most smitten.

Daniel grinned. “Like attracts like.”

Jamie tried not to groan-Mia hadn’t slept well until she started kindergarten. He hoped it wasn’t contagious. “Think we should try to move them upstairs?”

“Move a sleeping baby?” His brother-in-law looked like he’d suggested soaking the place in gasoline and lighting a match.

Okay, dumb idea. Jamie shrugged. “Fine. I’ll pull out an air mattress.” Mia was an awesome babysitter, but she didn’t have the magic necessary to shut down Kenna’s middle-of-the-night tricks. Hell, Jamie didn’t always have the magic necessary-he’d had to port in Aervyn two nights ago for backup.

Five-year-olds did not wake up well at 3 a.m.

Daniel grimaced and stretched his arms overhead. “Got two mattresses? I think my wife’s still in Nova Scotia.”

Maybe. Jamie mentally searched the contents of the garage for the camping supplies-and felt muffled laughter hit his mind channels. *Unless you cleaned up since the last time I was in your garage, just give up now, brother mine.*

It wasn’t a total disaster-he knew exactly where his motorcycle was. The rest was just creatively distributed. And his sister obviously wasn’t in Fisher’s Cove anymore.

Nell’s chuckles multiplied, audible now as she made her way down the stairs. Jamie ported the cookies and beer she carried over to the desk.

Daniel, older and wiser, went to grab the sleeping bags. “Four asleep at home?”

“Six. Sierra’s crashed in with the girls, and Caro’s taken over the couch.” Nell kissed her daughter’s forehead and settled into a chair. “Something about making bunny pancakes with Aervyn in the morning.”

“We have babysitters?” Her husband wiggled his eyebrows. “Jamie, port us someplace private, would you?”

Jamie grabbed a beer. “There’s an air mattress in the garage somewhere.” Nothing in the brother manual said he had to make his sister’s sex life easy.

Nell laughed and snagged a cookie, kissing her husband on the way back to her chair. “Catch me up-did you figure out how Adele got in?”

Daniel grinned. “Not the same way I did.”

Jamie winced-it still messed seriously with his pride that anyone had ever busted into Realm, but at least the first guy to do it had owned serious coding chops. And the first thing they'd hired Daniel to do afterward was to fix the holes he'd used to get in. Realm had been invincible ever since.

Until their shiny gold visitor had shown up.

Nell looked his direction. Jamie sighed and told her the answer she wouldn't like any better than he had. "If it wasn't coding skills, then it had to be magic."

His sister just rolled her eyes and reached for another cookie. *Tell me something I don't know.*

It was hard to be at your best at 2 a.m. "I've been running traces in the scanning data." All magic used in Realm left a record, one they primarily used for repair work. Witches were good at breaking things. "I've found her entry, but the traces make no sense."

He clicked a couple of keys, muttered a quick spell, and brought up what Mia called the holo-display. It was very *Star Trek*. "See here? That's the spike when she entered."

Nell frowned and poked her finger at thin air. "The data's backwards, baby brother."

He stuck out his tongue-the standard response to that particular nickname ever since he'd been Aervyn's age. "It's not. I quadruple checked it. The energy surge came from *inside* Realm."

His sister blinked, cookie halfway to her mouth. "She broke in from the inside?"

That's what the data said, which made exactly zero sense. "I traced all the users online when she showed up. Several witches, and plenty of them up to mischief, but none with that kind of power."

Daniel's eyes narrowed. "Power can be augmented by code. I looked for a hacker on the outside, but not one on the inside."

Finally, points for the sleep-deprived witch. Jamie stretched his creaky back again. "I did. The best coder online when it happened was Ginia." Who had definitely not been aiding and abetting a Realm breach-Mia had been ready to spit nails at the mere suggestion. "And even inside code leaves tracks. There just aren't any."

He shrugged, brain fighting the suck of exhaustion. Nell was awesomely smart, even in the middle of the night. Time to lay out the facts. "No coding. Lots of magic from the inside, but not Net magic. Unknown origins, unknown witch."

Nell's eyebrows flew up at the last two. "It wasn't Adele doing the magic?"

He'd spent the last two hours making sure. "Nope. She had help. Help with some serious spellcasting talents." The parallels weren't lost on either of them. A baby and a glittery visitor, both coated in strange

magic.

Time to go visit a Las Vegas medium.

Right after he got some sleep.

Chapter 5

Hell was at the door. Marcus sprang up in the dark, sleep fleeing as he prepared to fight the barbarians at the gates.

And realized, all too late, that the barbarian was still in his chair, screaming like she'd been run through. Gods. A tiny, flailing ball of mad with the lungs of a staff sergeant.

Smart men slept alone.

He squinted at the old clock on his mantel. 5:30 a.m. The time of the mists.

Shadows of terror still lurching through his nerves, Marcus reached for the baby, annoyed lullaby at the ready-and realized the fear he felt wasn't all his. Her brain was frantic, a tiny maelstrom of fright.

It pummeled his heart. And then *she* did, little fists and heels beating into his chest as he cuddled her close. "Shh, sweet girl. Shh. It's just the night. I've got you now. Shh."

She was so cold. He grabbed one of Moira's throws off the back of the couch, cursing his total incompetence. What idiot let a baby sleep half naked? Fire power wasn't in his arsenal, but he pushed energy into the air around her, calling the molecules to a faster dance.

One last piercing wail and the five-alarm cries stopped, replaced by hiccupping sniffles that did funny things to his ability to breathe. "Shh, sweetheart, that's it now." Morgan snuggled close, soothed by the magic, warm wool, and soft words.

Marcus was soothed by none of them.

Guilt stomped across familiar pathways in his soul, kicking the occasional rock for good measure. What kind of utter moron couldn't manage to keep a baby fed and warm for a few hours? He looked down into bright eyes, shaking his head in disgust. "This should be a lesson to both of us, girl-child."

She only looked up at him, a stray hiccup all that disturbed the picture of wide-awake contentment.

Marcus sighed. "Not going back to sleep, are you?" Amusement

snuck in, despite his efforts to bar the gates. “Aunt Moira says wee girls who wake up early are destined to rule the world.” Which sounded like utter hogwash until you were peering into sparkling eyes at 5:30 a.m.

Hecate’s hells. Babies didn’t sparkle, and grown men didn’t listen to old Irish fairy tales.

He glowered down at the girl in his arms-and snorted in surprise as she glowered right back. *Feisty little thing, are you?*

She scrunched up her face one more time-and then an explosion of major proportions rocked her lower half.

Marcus hadn’t been born yesterday. Anyone stuck in Fisher’s Cove for the last two months knew that babies pooped with a vengeance.

Very carefully, he shifted his hands away from the danger zone.

Time to give her back to the experts. They could hardly blame him that she’d picked 5 a.m. to empty her bowels.

***

Moira smiled into her tea as shadows moved in her garden. Either the faeries were dancing in her flowers again, or a tall man with a baby in his arms was coming for a visit.

She’d be fine with either.

The shadows moved toward her back entry. Marcus and Morgan, then. She got up to pour another cup of tea-her nephew wasn’t a morning witch.

Her back carefully to the door, she waited until the latch closed behind him. No point making it easy for him to run. “The best of the morning to you, then. Scones will be a minute in the oven yet.”

“She’s filled her diaper.”

Moira tucked her grin away before she turned around. “Well, and good morning to you too, nephew.”

He held out the baby at arms’ length. Carefully.

Silly man. Moira picked up his cup of tea and moved toward the table where her cup still beckoned. “You’ll be needing that bag of supplies we sent home with you.” Not entirely true-she always had a nappy or two tucked away-but time he started to learn the basic rules of caring for a wee one.

He looked like she’d asked him to stroll across the ocean barefoot and bring her back a nice Irish cuppa.

Trying desperately not to giggle, Moira bent over her tea cup, inhaling deeply. “You’ll be wanting a fresh diaper and some of the wet

cloths in the purple pouch." Baby paraphernalia had come a long way since her day. She'd stitched whimsies onto the purple wipes pouch herself.

"Bag." The item in question slammed down on the table.

"Baby." Marcus towered above her, holding out the tiny girl with curious eyes. "Anything else you need?"

Moira knew a key moment in battle when she met one. "A bit more honey for my tea would be nice, but that can wait until you've gotten Morgan a new nappy."

"I don't change diapers." Said with the finality of the Grim Reaper.

"You do now." Her nephew wasn't the only witch who could use that tone.

It took a very long time, but Marcus finally blinked. "You change every baby in the village. Why not this one?"

Victors could be gracious-and whether he knew it or not yet, this battle was over. "I do. And I'll be happy to help you with her care from time to time." She tried to find words that would make sense to his agile, narrow-minded brain. "When you train a witchling, do you take care of all the magic for them?" She knew the answer-few trainers were tougher on their charges than her nephew.

"No." The answer came grudgingly. Followed by a small light of defiance. "But you assume I want to learn how to change a diaper."

Ah, how she enjoyed a dance of wits. "Not at all. I assume it's a skill you need to acquire. There's a world of difference."

"Caring for babies is women's work."

For that, he deserved a cup of tea poured on his head-but sometimes the best revenge wasn't the most obvious one. Moira knew her village, her neighbors, and her nephew. "Fine then. Feel free to find a woman who agrees with you." She picked up her tea, willing the twinkle out of her eyes. "I'd say you have a couple more minutes before wee Morgan becomes quite unhappy with her current state of affairs."

She'd have sworn two lavender eyes twinkled right back at her.

Dark brown ones snapped with fear-tinged fury. "What is this, some kind of twisted revenge?"

No, my sweet, wounded boy. Moira set the thought free, trusting his mind would be unable to ignore it. *I believe it's a long-needed gift.*

She held her breath until Marcus stormed out, oddly contented babe still in his arms. And considered it a fine start to her morning.

***

Nell looked at the Taj Mahal of hotels dominating the landscape in front of them and glanced over at her brother. “She lives in a casino?”

Jamie grinned. “No. A few blocks away. Maybe Daniel thinks we should try the slots first.”

Great. A Realm taxi driver with a sense of humor-just what they needed. Nell picked up her phone to text her husband, and laughed as a nine-year-old face came onscreen instead. “Sorry, Mama. Aervyn wanted to help, and he missed a little.”

Even better-apparently they were letting five-year-olds drive now. “Uncle Jamie will practice with him later. Can you beam us to Adele’s offices now?”

Mia nodded, full of repressed humor. “They’re really sparkly.”

That was quite the statement from the Queen of Glitter. “I’ll tell Uncle Jamie to put on his sunglasses. Beam us over, Scotty.”

“Beaming.” Mia looked down-and Nell felt the odd suck of a Realm transport spell.

When she popped out the other end, the first thing she did was grab her brother’s sunglasses. “Holy hell.” “Sparkly” was an entirely inadequate adjective for the bedazzled view.

“It takes work to out-glitter Las Vegas,” said an amused voice over her shoulder. Nell spun around-and found herself nose-to-nose with gold lamé.

She’s not surprised to see us. Jamie’s mindsend was cautious, but impressed.

“Course I’m not.” Adele nodded at the glitzy woman standing by the door and headed into the office building of Underwood International. “You’re smart people, and I’m not hard to find.”

Nell slammed down her mental barriers. “You mindread?”

Gold shoulders shrugged and angled toward the private elevator. “Only when someone with decent power is being sloppy.” Adele eyed them both. “And that’s the last advantage I give up on my turf.”

Message received, loud and clear. Adele Underwood was a force to be reckoned with. A very shiny force.

Which meant it was time for an apology. “Sorry. Witches who live in Berkeley shouldn’t throw stones or make fast judgments based on appearances.” Nell held out her hand. “We have a mystery to solve, and we’d really appreciate your help.”

“You’d have had it anyhow.” Adele’s eyes outsparkled her rings. “But since you’re going to play nicely, I won’t mess with you for a few days before I give it.”

She could have done it-that was abundantly clear. Nell nodded. “You’re a witch. One who can do more than just the occasional fire

globe."

"Not much more." Adele ushered them both out of the elevator onto carpet four inches thick. "A stitch of mindreading, intermittent empathy, a little precog. And occasionally the dead talk to me."

"Not what your bio says." Jamie paused, taking in the gold-plated view of Adele Underwood's private office. "You peddle snake oil."

Oh, boy. Clearly her brother wasn't quite ready to extend his respects to a fellow witch.

"I don't." Adele gestured to two chairs. "I used to work the customer service hotline at a telephone company. You wouldn't believe the number of people who called just to chat. People need someone to talk to. I provide that."

"For $4.99 a minute."

Ah. Now Nell knew why Jamie was still circling the wagons. He'd done most of the digging on Underwood International.

"For the first three minutes. Rest of the call's free. Up to an hour." Adele dropped into a facing chair. "I assumed a skilled investor like yourself would have read the fine print."

Nell's eyes snapped away from the windows. Jamie invested very quietly. Adele had done some digging of her own-deep and fast. "You don't build this kind of empire charging fifteen dollars an hour."

"Nope." Adele poured coffee into three cups. She winked at Jamie. "I have some investments. They do pretty well. This here is all just pretty wrapping so folks feel like they're getting their money's worth when they call to talk to my people."

Her baby brother had a hell of a poker face, but Nell could feel the neurons in his brain shorting. "You promise messages from the dead."

"Sure do." Adele set down her coffee cup, eyes suddenly serious. "You ever talked to the dead? They pretty much all have only one thing they want to say. 'I love you.'" She shrugged. "And the occasional dead asshat who doesn't want to say that isn't getting any of my help."

Game, set, match. Nell grinned-no way Jamie could hold out against a woman who stood against dead asshats.

It took a moment. And then humor flooded into his eyes, along with something deeper. "Evan's message wasn't that simple."

"No." Adele's voice leaked sadness. "Although the love is there too, whenever folks are ready to believe it."

Nell tried not to feel sorry for one crusty old bachelor. "He expects us to believe messages about soldiers and babies instead?"

"Not all of you. Just enough of you to keep the child safe." Adele sat up straighter. "Wait. Has Morgan arrived?"

It didn't take a mindreader to pick up her racing concern. Nell

sipped her coffee, willing the caffeine to her brain. “She did. Last night. We need to know more about what’s going on. She arrived coated in magic.”

Adele nodded slowly. “She would have. He would have taken every precaution.”

“He? Evan?” Jamie leaned forward. “He’s alive?”

“No.” Adele stood up and walked toward the windows. “He’s a traveler. One with the strongest magic I’ve ever seen.”

Nell felt the world shifting under her feet. “Wait. Astral travelers aren’t dead?”

“To most of us, they are.” Sparkly fingers danced in the early morning light. “I only know what little Evan has been able to explain. There’s a world between, one that travelers can visit.”

“Most don’t come back.” Jamie’s voice was tight with fear.

Adele’s face softened. “Your Kenna isn’t a traveler. Evan said to tell you that.”

Nell watched a weight lift from her brother’s shoulders-one she hadn’t even known existed.

His breath whooshed out. “I have some precog. She’s got so much magic…”

“Not this one.” Adele patted his shoulder. “He seemed very sure.”

Jamie nodded, mind heavy with gratitude.

Nell said quiet thanks to a dead man she’d never met. “He’s still in that world-the in-between one?” And he couldn’t come back-that much she could read in their occasional medium’s eyes.

“Yes. He calls it the halfway house.” Eyes met Nell’s over her brother’s head. “He does what he can to help the souls passing through. Sends on the dead peacefully, chases the occasional traveler back to safety.”

Traveling was a talent most witchlings grew out of-if they lived. Evan had been the last witchling lost to the astral plane. The dots connected. “He sends our travelers back?”

Adele nodded. “He kept saying something about ‘with great power comes great responsibility.’”

Nell felt the lump hit her throat. “If you talk to him again, tell him thank you. And that his aunt Moira would be very proud of him.”

“That will be up to him.” Adele sat down again, picking up her coffee. “He comes to me. I just listen and deliver messages. And crash into your Witches’ Lounge against my better judgment. He weaves a hell of a spell, that one.”

Jamie’s eyebrows hit the ceiling. “Evan got you into Realm?”

Adele’s laugh was loud, long, and sent every inch of gold lamé shimmering. “You think *I’m* that kind of computer genius, honey boy?”

Nell filed away the “honey boy” for the next time she needed to poleax Jamie. Big sisters took their advantages where they could. “You’re saying a five-year-old boy lives in the in-between world and throws around enough magic to transport babies and full-grown witches?”

“You got a better explanation?” Adele refilled coffee cups. “And he’s not five any more. I’ve been chatting with a grown man-that much I know for sure.”

The dead grew up? Nell pushed her coffee away, trying to wrap her head around the strangeness, and leaned instead on the question that really mattered. “Why did he send us Morgan?”

“I’m not sure.” For the first time since they’d arrived, Adele’s mind clouded. “He said only that it was necessary to keep her safe.”

That wasn’t good enough. “We can’t just keep a baby because of a cryptic message.” Well, they could, but it might be every kind of wrong.

Adele eyed Nell. “You put a fetching spell out into the ether. It fetched. Evan said to thank you for the spell-it made his work much easier.”

A dead witch had hijacked her spell? This morning could not get any weirder. “It’s supposed to fetch *witches*.” Morgan had arrived covered in magic, but it hadn’t been hers-every competent witch in Fisher’s Cove had checked.

“Sometimes the universe doesn’t go exactly like you planned.” The humor in gold-flecked eyes was hard not to warm to. “A mother of five ought to understand that just fine.”

Yeah. She did. “If he talks to you again…”

Adele nodded, the eyes behind the glitz as solid as Nell’s own. “I’ll let you know.”

***

Sophie looked over at Elorie, competently juggling two nursers. The inn’s parlor had become their favorite gathering place in the mornings-big enough to contain babies and all those who wanted to rock them, and close to the kitchen. Aaron calmly fed whoever arrived and claimed it was good for business.

Probably true-Aislin and Lucas happily showered smiles on anyone who looked their direction. Adam, a month younger, hadn’t found his smiles yet-but he radiated newborn cuteness.

It was these moments of peace that kept Sophie sane when her

unhappily nocturnal baby fussed all hours of the night.

Elorie glanced up in surprise as the floorboards of the inn's parlor shook. The shadow filling the doorway moments later answered one question-and created many more.

Marcus held out the Moses basket, presumably filled with baby. "Where do I put her?"

It was a dangerous question-Sophie had stopped off to say good morning to Aunt Moira before coming to the inn. "Wherever you like-is she sleeping?"

"Yes." His eyes held a strange light of victory. "She's diapered, fed, burped, and had some blanket time in a warm, sunny spot. She should sleep until noon."

Not if there was any justice in the world, but it was a pretty impressive list. "Sounds like you've had a productive morning."

"I spent the morning demonstrating that any minimally competent adult with an Internet connection can take care of a baby's basic needs." Marcus set the basket down in a corner-with a gentleness totally at odds with his gruffness. "Perhaps now we can have a more mature discussion about who should be responsible for Morgan's care until we sort out whatever tragic mistake landed her on my doorstep."

It was a very nice speech. Rehearsed, even. Sophie weighed her choices. "You don't believe she was sent here?"

"Hardly." His glare cracked, momentarily distracted by movement in the basket. "And with the possible exception of my misguided aunt, doubt runs rampant in the rest of you as well."

It had been-she couldn't deny it. But as Sophie watched the crankiest man she knew sing a quiet lullaby in the direction of a restless baby, doubts began to leak away.

Sometimes magic worked in very mysterious ways.

And Sophie decided it could perhaps use her help. "Elorie and I have our hands full at the moment, and fishing season is in full swing." The village was at its yearly busiest.

"She handles two." Marcus glanced Elorie's direction. "Surely adding another for a few days wouldn't trouble you much."

Arrogant ass. "I haven't slept eight hours straight in a month." Hell, she hadn't slept *two* hours in a row, but no point scaring him silly. "One baby is plenty for me and Mike, and it seems you've shown yourself to be quite competent this morning."

"I'm hardly the appropriate person to care for an infant." Marcus glowered. "And if neither of you can make time in your busy, couch-sitting schedules, I'll find one of the village women to care for her until we can straighten this mess out."

Not if Moira had done her job and gotten to them first. Marcus was about to discover that the legendary helpfulness of Fisher's Cove

had gone on vacation.

And if the steam coming out of Elorie's ears was any indication, he royally deserved it.

***

Jamie was going to owe her for this. Fixing every stupid man in the world was not in her job description. Nell donned mental armor-if she was heading into the bear's cave, it paid to be prepared.

A growl was all the warning she had that the bear had come out to meet her. Marcus stepped out onto his porch, beer in one hand, imaginary shotgun in the other. "What, now they've called in reinforcements?"

Nell threw up a training circle. It seemed like a smart precaution-and it would send a message to the man acting like a snotty child.

Scratch that-her children had far better manners.

Marcus scowled and swatted the circle down. "If you came here to blow magical bubbles at me, you can just jump on your shiny steed and head back home. I have the girl, and the ever-meddling witches have made darned sure I have to keep her until I can get someone sane to drive out here and pick her up."

Oh, shit. "Pick her up?"

"I called child services. They seem to be the appropriate authorities to take responsibility in this matter. The woman I spoke to seemed quite competent."

They'd just finished rescuing Sierra from child services. Be damned if they were shipping someone off in trade. "She was sent for *you*, Marcus-not some nameless bureaucrat."

"Well then, someone made a rather sizable mistake, don't you think?" His eyes were cold, ocean-washed granite. "I'm simply fixing it."

Time to lay down her hand. "I went to see Adele this morning. She's the medium who brought the message from Evan."

The granite went flying at his brother's name, replaced by volcanic spew. "Evan's dead. And the next person who brings him into this will deserve what she gets." Marcus turned to look over the sea, repressed violence in every line of his body. Dismissed. Get out.

Sometimes, you just couldn't leave the wounded bear alone. Nell threw up another training circle-a lot stronger this time. "You can duck your head and play ostrich, but you don't get to take your temper out on every living thing."

Marcus whirled. “I’ve had no sleep and the last of my patience ran screaming several hours ago. I can’t control what obscenities the rest of you choose to believe, but I’m not going to sit here and pretend my brain leaked out of my head.”

“What’s not to believe?” Nell was ready to crack Moira’s cauldron over his thick skull. “Let’s talk about facts. Fact-Adele got into Realm, and she didn’t do it with code or spell. Fact-she brought a message and something in it knocked you out cold. I can only presume it was truth.”

She paused, reining in her temper. A little. “Fact-the message spoke of a baby coming. She came. And she arrived coated in the kind of magic you can’t possibly explain away as a paperwork mix-up.”

His head snapped up. “We have no idea what kind of magic it was.”

She did now. And had scans and graphs and data to prove it. “The not-of-this-world kind.”

He was a smart man-and Nell could see the moment when truth finally punched him in the gut. “Evan.” One whispered word from a man literally slammed to his knees.

Any other man she would have gathered in her arms like one of her boys. This one was far too fragile. Nell stood vigil as his soul trembled-and sent all the love she dared.

Finally, he looked up, anguish in his eyes. “Evan sent the baby?”

It killed her to do it. But she owed it to a witch she’d never met. “Yes. He sent her *to you*.”

And, just maybe, Evan Buchanan had sent the key that would crack the Ice Age in his twin brother’s heart.

It was a war worth fighting. Nell looked at the shattered man bowed down in front of her-and signed up.

She’d give him a couple hours of peace-and then she’d launch her assault.

Chapter 6

A quick shimmer of magic was all the warning Marcus got. A small boy materialized in the middle of his kitchen, offering smiles and a plate of cookies. “Mama sent me. She says you’re really cranky and you could use some cuddles.”

Anvils and cuddles. Nell was a very dangerous witch. And he was a weak and tired man unable to resist the invitation in big brown eyes. Or cookies. “Want some milk to go with those?”

“Yup. One for you too-these are dunkers. You can dunk them in tea if you want, but only really old people do that.”

A stray chuckle escaped Marcus’s throat. Aervyn might be the only person alive who didn’t throw him in with the old people. “Two glasses of milk, then.”

Aervyn climbed onto a stool next to the counter, helping himself to a cookie. “Where’s Morgan?”

It took Marcus a moment to connect the name with the pesky infant sleeping in his living room after countless poopy diapers, another long walk on the beach, and one of the bottles that kept mysteriously showing up on his countertop. “Taking a nap.”

“You should try to remember her name.” His pint-sized therapist handed over a cookie along with the lecture.

It probably didn’t take a psychologist to figure out why he preferred to think of her as “that girl-child.” Marcus poured two glasses of milk. “I’m not used to babies.”

“I am.” Aervyn nodded sagely. “Babies are trouble.”

Marcus blinked. That wasn’t the direction he’d expected this to head.

His visitor broke a cookie in two and dropped one half into a glass of milk. “Mama says they grow up to be more fun, but when they’re little, they just cry a lot and make everybody really grumpy and you have to be quiet all the time.”

That was quite the list of grievances, especially from a source who rarely complained about anything. Marcus tried to dig out of his

sleep-deprived depression for a moment. It occurred to him that Fisher's Cove wasn't the only place invaded by babies this spring. "Kenna's keeping everyone busy, is she?"

Aervyn grinned in one of the lightning changes of mood cookies often produced. "She's trying to crawl now, but she keeps putting her bum-bum in the air and her face on the ground." He shook his head at the obvious silliness of such an effort. "I'm trying to teach her, but she doesn't listen very well."

Probably all to the good-babies were problematic enough when they just flailed like turtles on their backs wherever you put them. He shuddered to imagine Fisher's Cove when the baby herd mastered mobility. "Perhaps you should just leave her in one place, my young friend. Run while you can."

"Can't." All the weight of the world sat on five-year-old shoulders. "Mama says I have to be nice to her and help her learn how to be a witch and all that stuff."

There were advantages to being a crusty old bachelor. However, even he wasn't dumb enough to foment rebellion in everyone's favorite superwitch. "I'm sure there are other people to help Kenna learn those things."

"Lots." The answer came easily and accompanied by cookie crumbs. "But Mama says every witchling has some really special helpers, and I'm a'posed to decide whether I want to be one of Kenna's."

Nell really was a dangerous witch. "And what have you decided?"

Half of Aervyn's head reappeared from behind a beer mug of milk-the cottage drinking glass collection was still a little sparse. "I don't know yet. She's kind of annoying, and she cries a lot and doesn't pay very good attention when I show her magic tricks." He grinned. "But she likes it when I port her places."

Marcus felt his grumpy old adult neurons firing. "Is that safe?" Kenna was only a few months old-that seemed a little young for magical joyrides.

"Uncle Jamie said it's smarter than leaving her to her own devices." Aervyn's forehead wrinkled. "But I don't think Kenna has any devices yet-she chewed on Auntie Nat's iPhone once, but Gramma Retha made her give it back." He winced. "She yelled really loud. Kenna, I mean-not Gramma Retha."

Marcus had reason to know Retha had excellent lungs too, but he was more interested in the tidbit that babies liked iPhones. Good to know.

"If you wanna try it…" his cookie-monster companion leaned in and whispered, "Uncle Jamie says it's a really good idea to put a waterproofing spell on the phone first."

Baby drool on his precious electronics. Gods-had he really fallen that far? “Morgan won’t be staying long. We need to find out where she really belongs.”

“She belongs with you.” Said with the calm conviction of a witchling used to believing his elders. “Aunt Moira says so, and she’s never wrong about babies.”

Maybe not-but she was wrong about one grown man. They all were. Even if Morgan was Evan-sent, he could hardly keep a baby.

“Sure you can.” Aervyn, blithely mindreading, offered milk-soaked cookie crumbs to the suddenly friendly cat. “Mama says you have a really hard head, but it’s not totally stupid.” He grinned. “Well, she used a different word, but her head said ‘stupid.’”

Marcus could only imagine-Nell’s opinion of him had never been very high. However, she sent him cookies and company, and both managed to squirm into his heart on far too regular a basis.

Aervyn hopped off his stool and crawled into Marcus’s lap. “So, were you really mean?”

Marcus rested his chin on a curly head. “I guess I was.”

It did strange things to his heart when the easy love that always flowed from Aervyn’s mind didn’t waver. “You can have that last cookie, then. It will help you to be sweeter when Morgan wakes up.”

For just a moment, Marcus wished he lived in a world where things could be that simple.

***

Sophie scooped up the last of the jars from the table. Herbs and lids back to being properly matched-and Lizzie had gotten some nice practice identifying plants in their dried, crumbly forms.

It was more fun when they were green and could be tempted to grow a pretty flower-but any Fisher’s Cove healer who couldn’t tell the difference between feverfew and lady’s mantle from just a careful whiff would likely end up locked in Moira’s kitchen until they could.

Lizzie had been smart enough to focus on herbal crumbles.

She looked up from the table, the last mysterious sample still rolling in her fingers. “Lady’s mantle? It doesn’t smell like that, really-more like moldy chamomile, but it vibrates like lady’s mantle. Maybe a little slower, though.”

It had taken Sophie ten years of hard practice to pick up plant vibrations. Lizzie and Ginia both did it with ease. Nothing like a couple of witchlings to keep you humble. “Those are good clues. It’s

tricky when your fingers and your nose are telling you something different. Your job is to figure out which one to trust."

Her pupil frowned. "Can I taste it?"

Always an alternative fraught with risk. "What do you think?"

"Well, if it's feverfew, then tasting it would be fine. But if it's lady's mantle, then it will taste like oyster poo and make me burp for three days."

Sophie hid a grin-oyster poo was a particularly apt description. "Well, if you had a patient to dose and you weren't sure if you had the right herb, what would you do?"

"Protect the patient." The answer came quickly-healer ethics weren't Lizzie's problem. "So I guess I'd have to taste it. Or give some to Sean, because he deserves three days of burps."

Well, maybe her trainee's ethics still had the occasional hiccup. "What did he do now?" There was always something-Sean breathed trouble.

"He said only girls have babies, so it must be really easy." Lizzie's eyes held mutiny now. "I told him that boys would be too scaredy to push out a baby. Except for maybe Uncle Aaron-he's really brave."

Aaron had earned a ton of respect during the twins' birth. Little Aislin had arrived weak and blue and he'd willed life into her, one slow breath at a time.

It had taken Sophie a week to help Lizzie understand why none of the healers in the room had intervened. What any of them could have done with one finger had taken every ounce of Aaron's love and will-and that had been the right choice.

Learning when *not* to use magic was one of the harder lessons of being a witch.

"One day Sean will learn how wrong he is." Sophie bent down to kiss Lizzie's head-and made a mental note to have a chat with their misguided troublemaker. "And being a daddy isn't an easy job either." She touched the mystery herb-gently. She didn't want burps. "Do you have it figured out yet?"

"It's lady's mantle." Lizzie sounded more definite now. "Ginia said feverfew feels slimy if you listen to it for long enough. This one's not slimy." She looked entirely relieved to have avoided oyster poo.

Sophie was duly impressed-it was an old jar, and crumbled well beyond visual recognition. "It's time to replace it anyhow. We can do some moon harvesting-tomorrow night's the right timing."

Staying up late was still a serious treat for a six-year-old girl. Freed from lessons, she hopped around like a dizzy ping-pong ball. "Can Ginia come?"

Lizzie, an only child, adored her fellow healer trainee. Sophie blessed the technology that let two girls on opposite sides of the

continent gather at will. Healing was often a very lonely craft. “Of course. We’ll do a moon circle first.”

“I’ll go tell Gran.” Small feet dashed for the door and then skidded to a halt. Lizzie turned, face scrunched up. “So, is Uncle Marcus Morgan’s mommy now?”

Almost a year back in Fisher’s Cove, and Sophie still wasn’t used to the lightning changes in topic that came with being six. “He’s taking care of Morgan for a while.”

“Like a mommy.” Lizzie’s eyes brightened.

Apparently Sean wasn’t the only witchling with some gender prejudices. “Aaron and Mike both take care of babies. It’s not just a mommy’s job.”

“They’re daddies.” Lizzie shrugged and turned to leave. “That’s just a fancy name for a mommy with more ear hairs.”

Sophie shook her head in the direction of the now-empty doorway and chuckled. She’d learned not to argue with six-year-old logic. Especially when ear hairs were involved.

***

He was not losing a staring contest with a baby. Marcus glared and tried to add reason to his cause. “You need to sleep, girl-child. You might think you can out-cranky me, but it’s not true, I promise you.”

Eyes that belonged in Moira’s garden stared at him-and looked not remotely sleepy. “At your age, you’re supposed to take at least three naps a day.” Or so the Google had assured him. “The afternoon’s half gone and you haven’t slept a wink in hours.”

He eyed his easy chair wistfully. Once upon a time, he’d actually been able to sit down when his legs got wobbly and tired. And his arms had lost all feeling several hours ago.

Dammit, he was not a whiny witch. And this negotiating and coddling of small creatures was getting ridiculous. Marcus straightened up and glared at the baby in his arms. “Morgan of Mystery, it is damn well time for you to go to sleep.”

A snort behind him was all the warning he got that company had arrived. Marcus turned, curious-and stared. “What are you doing here?”

Daniel chuckled, unloading strange paraphernalia from his arms. “I’m here to give you a babywearing lesson.”

A what? Marcus stared in stupefied silence.

Daniel picked up one of the contraptions he'd dumped on the couch. "I brought our entire collection. Slings, pouches, Mei Tai, three different wraps. Aervyn liked the sling best, so let's start with that one."

It was a swatch of fabric bright enough to stun the eyes of any sensible person, complete with gold rings and a tassel.

His uninvited guest grinned. "You'll get used to the stripes. They say babies can't see colors yet, but Aervyn screamed if I put him in the nice, boring, khaki one." Daniel dumped the thing over his shoulders and reached for the baby. "Let me show you how it ends, and then we can start back at the beginning."

A few quick moves and Morgan was nestled on Daniel's chest, held tight by snug stripes and cooing happily.

Marcus didn't know whether to be jealous or to take the moment of opportunity and run like hell. And he was still deeply suspicious-Nell Walker didn't do anything by accident. "Why are you here?"

Daniel stroked fuzzy red hair. "Because my wife has taken pity on you, and you can't tell *me* this is women's work."

He didn't need pity-from Nell or anyone else. "I hardly need to learn to strap a baby to my chest. She's not staying."

He spoke into a void. Daniel snuggled a contented baby head under his chin and swayed, quietly humming.

Marcus tried to pick up the tune-Aunt Moira's lullaby had lost its luster by the six hundredth repetition. "What are you singing?"

"Bob." Daniel looked up. "Aervyn liked Aerosmith and Tina Turner best, but the girls all liked Bob."

It took a moment, even with the hint. Daniel, uber-dad of the universe, had Morgan inches from sleep-to the reggae sounds of No Woman, No Cry.

The irony hit Marcus's sleep-deprived sense of humor square between the eyes.

And then Daniel reached for one of the sling's gold rings and slid an entirely unimpressed baby out of her happy, snuggly place. "That's how it's done." He held out the sling, juggling a fussy girl one-handed. "Your turn."

It had been at least ten years since Marcus had done battle with Daniel in Realm-but he'd learned one thing very well all those years ago. Nobody beat The Hacker when he'd staked his ground. Nobody. And behind Daniel's easy grin was a mind suddenly walled in steely determination.

This wasn't about striped slings or baby carriers or lessons.

It was war. And Nell had sent her most potent weapon.

***

Nell slid into the hot water and sighed in bliss. There were few manifestations of magic more awesome than Moira's pool.

The other inhabitants of the pool smiled in welcome. Sophie handed over a glass of something tall, cool, and minty. "I thought we'd really moved up in the world when we started having our chats in the Witches' Lounge, but this beats even that."

Nell grinned. When you were a new mama, a hot soak and a chat were hard to come by. "Mike has Adam?"

"Mmm, hmm." Sophie leaned her head back against a convenient pillowy rock. "He laughed when Daniel came by to reclaim most of the babywearing gear."

Their collection of slings and pouches had done a lot of rounds over the years. And the sight of Mike wearing a tiny babe in a bright orange fleece pouch brought back lots of memories-it had been Mia's favorite place to ride.

Moira bent down a flower stem and sniffed. "Spring has really come. It's a good time of year to take the wee ones for long walks on the beach."

Sophie's eyes twinkled. "The grapevine says Marcus was out there with Morgan half the night."

Nell tried to quell the squirt of sympathy. If Marcus's arms were ready to fall off, it was his own darned fault. The man had been watching witch babies travel in slings and pouches and wraps for most of his natural life. A smart man would have asked for help the moment a baby landed in his lap.

"Your Daniel is a good man." Moira's hands created slow ripples in the warm waters-physical therapy, even now. "If anyone can get help through my nephew's thick head, he'll be the one."

Oh, Daniel would get the job done. Nell had seen the hints of steel in his eyes as he ported into Marcus's living room. There wasn't a better father on the planet-and he'd taken the "women's work" comment as a rather personal challenge.

And if that didn't work, there was always Ginia's green goo. Nell pulled out of her steam-induced reverie enough to actually talk out loud. "Ginia has some herb requests, if you have them. Something about moon-harvested sage, and lemon balm, I think. Apparently hers isn't old enough yet." Their entire back yard was turning into a witch apothecary-or at least the garden precursors.

Moira sipped her tea, eyes sharp with sudden interest. "Those are potent herbs-what's she brewing?"

Chuckles from the other side of the pool had them both looking at

Sophie, who grinned. “Three guesses.”

Nell didn’t even have one guess, but earth magics weren’t her realm. Moira contemplated a moment. “Ah, that’s a most interesting use. If it works, maybe she can brew up a batch for Marcus.”

Being lost at sea in a discussion of plants and remedies was becoming an all-too-familiar sensation. Nell raised her eyebrow and waited-usually some herb-smart witch eventually took pity.

“It’s a potion to increase tolerance.” Soft laughs from the elder healer in the group. “An old Irish remedy housewives use on their husbands-it’s supposed to make them easier to live with. I suspect our Ginia’s planning to use it on her wee brother.”

Aervyn hadn’t been up to more than his usual mischief. “I’m not sure I want her magicking him into a more cooperative sibling.”

“It’s not for her.” Sophie smiled, love for her student in her eyes. “She’s trying to help him accept Kenna.”

Oh. Understanding hit Nell, along with a swelling pride in her girl. “He’s been struggling.”

“She knows.” Moira’s hands still moved lightly in the water. “It’s a healer’s job to know, and to help hearts and minds and bodies adjust.” She leaned back, looking well satisfied. “Our girl is finding her healer’s wisdom.” Her eyes hazed in thought. “And it just might be an excellent remedy for Marcus as well.”

Sophie nodded, amused. “Fine. I’ll make it, but you get to deliver it.”

Moira eyed the flowers carefully. “Make the airborne version. I’m thinking it’s time for my nephew’s home to be brightened with some of the blooms of spring.”

Nell made a mental note to be suspicious of any new flower bouquets. Parenting a healer had some hidden dangers.

Then again, it beat raising witchlings who set things on fire and ported themselves into the back yard in the wee hours of the night. Jamie was losing serious sleep to Kenna’s antics. Marcus had it easy.

Nell was very glad those days were mostly behind her. She found a new spot on a rock for her lolling head, and had almost managed to sink back into hot-pool stupor when the obvious finally hit. Nell’s eyes flew open-and met Moira’s, watching her closely. The old witch nodded. “Figured it out, have you? I was wondering when someone would.”

Sophie frowned. “What’s up?”

Nell felt the worry squeeze in on her. “None of us are reading that Morgan has power.”

“Aye.” Moira’s eyes held the kind of bravery that only came with a long life well lived. “Not yet.”

The newest mama in the group was still catching up. “You think

Morgan is a witchling? Or will be?"

Nell waited. Even sleep deprived, Sophie was a very quick witch.

A hissed-in breath said she'd arrived. "You think she might be a traveler."

"We don't know." Moira's voice oozed calm. Her mind held strength-and fear. "We only know that Evan sent her. For now, she's just a wee babe who needs lots of holding."

Which wasn't at all reassuring-their most powerful witches were often the most sensitive as babies.

"Do we tell Marcus?" Sophie looked justifiably squeamish at the thought.

Nell remembered the shattered man on the porch half a day earlier. Even Daniel wasn't going to make headway with a catatonic Marcus.

Moira finally shook her head. "No. He'll see it for himself when he's ready. For now, he's finding a small girl who eats and poops and sometimes sleeps quite terrifying enough."

Sophie nodded slowly. "I'll put a light temperature scan in place. If it triggers, we'll know to start setting the monitoring spells."

Just the thought sent ice running in Nell's veins. She'd set the watching spells every day for three years-until they were absolutely sure Aervyn wasn't a traveler. If tiny, happy Morgan of the lavender eyes might be…

"We'll watch," said Moira briskly. "But for now, I prefer an alternate explanation." Her face gleamed with pure Irish mischief. "I believe Evan's decided it's time for his brother to join the land of the living. What better way than a baby?"

Sophie's face lightened. "And you plan to help."

Nell rolled her eyes. Witches always planned to help.

"Aye." Moira leaned back against her pillow rock again and winked at Nell. "We've been trying to root Marcus in Fisher's Cove soil for a year now. I'm thinking that maybe spring has finally arrived."

One grumpy plant, about to be watered.

Chapter 7

Apparently the invasions weren't stopping anytime soon. Marcus stepped over a sleeping Hecate, sighed, and opened the door. At least these visitors hadn't beamed into his living room. "It's a sunny day. Surely you have someplace better to be than my cottage."

"Nope." Sean grinned and stepped across the threshold, unconcerned.

Marcus just shook his head-there'd been a time when they looked on him with something closer to fear and trembling. Tolerating a stowaway appeared to have done that in entirely. "School? Lessons?"

"It's Saturday." Kevin, Sean's far more mannerly twin, looked around. "Where's Morgan?"

"In his pouch, silly."

Lizzie seemed to think most people of the male persuasion were silly. She was, however, correct in this case. Marcus had balked entirely at the day-glow-bright striped sling, but Daniel had managed to scare up a black pouch device that carried the baby adequately without causing Marcus's eye sockets to bleed.

And he had to admit, his arms were far less spaghetti-like today.

"You're supposed to bend down." Lizzie tapped his elbow. "It's polite to show us the baby when we come over. Elorie always does it."

He'd missed the baby-manners class at school. "She's happy-I don't want to disturb her." Purple eyes stared up at him. Babies liked to watch faces, according to Daniel, the walking parent encyclopedia.

"You could sit down." Kevin pointed at the big easy chair. "Then we could see her really well."

Oh, no. He might be really new at this, but Marcus was crystal clear on one thing. He never got to sit. Ever. "She prefers it if I stand."

"Don't be silly." Lizzie took his hand with a bossiness usually reserved for women ten times her age and navigated Marcus into his easy chair. "We'll talk to her and she'll be perfectly happy."

Marcus held his breath and waited for the wail that never came. Morgan peered out of the pouch, surveying the faces around her.

Sean pulled out a light saber from some undisclosed location. “We could have a sword fight. Lucas really likes watching the sabers flash.”

“*Lucas* is a boy,” said Lizzie, in a tone that made every male in the room vibrate in protest. “Morgan doesn’t want to watch silly swords and pirates.”

“You like being a pirate, and you’re a girl.” Kevin, always the voice of reason, tried to calm things with facts.

Marcus could have told him that facts rarely carried weight with riled females.

His youngest visitor flounced, mutinous. “Girl pirates use *shiny* swords, not ones with stupid lights.”

Whatever Lizzie might be saying about her tinfoil sword out loud, her mind begged for a chance to swing a saber. And two years after the fact, Marcus realized that giving only the twins light sabers for Christmas had been a grave misdemeanor.

Sean, too dumb to realize such things, waved his damned sword in the air two inches from Lizzie’s nose.

“Here, you can use mine.” Kevin held out his own saber, handle first. “Just don’t hit the wall with it again. It took Uncle Billy a whole day to fix it last time.”

Marcus felt the joy dawn in Lizzie’s mind and wondered how he’d managed to be such a complete idiot for two entire years.

And why on earth he had a sudden desire to fix it.

***

Moira set her scrying bowl down on the table. It wasn’t the right tool for the job, but she didn’t have the right tool. Witches made do with what they had.

Carefully, she laid out the candles and herbs to open her mind and honor the ancient gifts. The bowl had been passed down to her through eleven generations, and while it might be a cantankerous old thing, the sense of history it carried spoke to her blood.

Evan was her blood.

So she would try. And she would trust.

It didn’t take her long to have everything ready. Rituals by needs got shorter when you were old. The smells of herbs and flowers from her garden mingled with the leftover scent of her tea.

A trio of Sophie’s crystals stood facing east. Amethyst for opening. Carnelian for remembering true. A beautiful blue lace agate for lightness and an acceptance of grace. Their request had worried

Sophie deeply, but she'd asked no questions.

It was east that Evan had gone.

She felt the settling in her blood. It was time. In the old, old Irish of her grandmothers, Moira called for the blessings of guidance, help, and truth. And then she began.

She did not seek to hear Evan speak. She hoped only that her words might cross the veil and reach his ears. *Her* magic was not strong enough-but *his* might be.

Dearest Evan. She peered into the depths of her bowl, picturing his impish face. *I imagine you still as my sweet, mischievous boy. Perhaps you are a man now-we know not how the astral planes work. I hope you aren't too very lonely and know how much you are loved.*

I wish I could picture where you are. And I worry that you carry a heavy weight. To the five-year-old boy, I often said that "with great power comes great responsibility." I say it still-but none of us were ever meant to carry that burden alone.

We miss you, lovey-you broke us all when you left. None more than your brother. It is for him that I reach out to you now. If the wee babe travels, it will destroy him. His heart will simply crack under the weight of it.

I don't know that I could bear it, either.

I trust that you need our help-and I pray that we can find the strength. Morgan is a gorgeous wee thing. We will do the very best we can for her.

Your auntie Moira loves you, sweet boy. So very much.

Moira slid her hand across the bowl's surface, run out of the magic still hers to call. Perhaps it had been enough. She closed her eyes and let tears roll, down into the pool of grief at the bottom of her heart.

***

This time, the knock on his door was expected. Marcus didn't get up-he didn't want to disturb the small, snoring creature on his chest.

Lizzie padded quietly into the room. "She's still sleeping?"

"She must have liked your lullaby." Marcus ignored the small voice in his head that insisted what he was about to do next was wrong. He wasn't above using sweet talk and bribery to get what he wanted-being reasonable had gotten him exactly nowhere. "I think she likes you."

"All the babies like me." Lizzie perched on the arm of the easy chair, eyes sharpening as she caught sight of his computer screen.

“What are you doing?”

“Shopping.” The final selling feature of the baby pouch had been Daniel’s promise that it freed up enough arms to actually operate a computer. When the twins and Lizzie had left him earlier, ensconced in his chair, laptop at his elbow, Marcus had felt almost human again.

“Those are sabers.” Lizzie sounded accusatory. “Just like the ones Kevin and Sean have.”

“No.” Marcus was not entirely an idiot. “They’re better. They have sound effects.”

It was a good thing he’d already read through the product description-it would have been hard to finish with Lizzie’s face an inch from the screen. Her head spun around-evidently beginner reading skills weren’t up to the task. “Tell me what it says. All of it.”

He read of the wonders of a toy that spoke in Luke Skywalker’s voice. That would have been Evan’s sword-Sir Evan of the Light, off to slay dragons, or at least to find a really big rock to climb.

Lizzie scowled. “Who wants to be stupid Luke?”

Marcus blinked, hazy blond knights evaporating in a puff of dust. “What?”

Her face and mind were both painted with disgust. “How come it has to talk in Luke Skywalker’s voice?”

The saber. Gods. “There’s a Darth Vader one too.”

Disgust turned to naked longing. “Can I see that one?”

Obediently, Marcus navigated to the Darth Vader version, complete with guy-wheezing-in-plastic-bag sound effects. Lizzie was enthralled.

Marcus yanked down his mind barriers. It was bribery-nothing more. He clicked on the “buy” button as casually as possible. And choked back a chuckle as one beginner reader figured out what he’d done.

She spun around on the arm of the chair, nose an inch from his. “Can I touch it first?”

What?

His confusion must have been obvious. “Your sword. If I get to touch it before anyone else, then it will always be a little bit mine.”

Ah. “I’m thinking I’ll be buying two.” He was pretty sure eyes couldn’t get any bigger. And dammit, he wasn’t supposed to be enjoying this. “One for Morgan. With a name like that, she’ll be needing a sword.”

Pure, heady hope hit Lizzie with the force of a lightning strike. “She’ll need someone to teach her.”

“That’s what I was thinking.” He eyed the tiny girl asleep on his chest as if seeking her input.

“I can do it.” Lizzie still spoke in whispers, a sign of prodigious

self-control given the wild tumbling of her brain. “I can start right away. I’ll show her some of my best moves, and she can watch the lights flash, and everything.” Blue eyes implored. “I bet she’d like the Darth one best.”

Strange things happening in his throat, Marcus added a second sword to his shopping cart.

For all his best efforts, it didn’t feel like a bribe.

***

Jamie strolled around the virtual streets of Realm’s main village, surveying the action. Sometimes, despite the game’s sword-and-sorcery time period, he felt like the town sheriff. Someone had been planting deviously silly spellcubes again, and it was his job to track down the miscreant.

He was pretty sure she wasn’t here yet-Warrior Girl’s hot pink armor was hard to miss.

Someone else had put in an appearance, though. Jamie stared at the gnarled old monk in surprise-Realm was the last place he’d expected to find Marcus anytime soon. New babies were hell on gaming time.

He crossed the street, falling into step beside the monk. “Someone rocking Morgan?”

Dark brown eyes scowled under a hood. “Lizzie’s watching her.”

And something about that tinged Marcus’s mind with guilt-and *Star Wars* music. Jamie shook his head-sleep deprivation did really weird things to his mindreading skills. “Babysitters are wonderful things. The triplets and Sierra look after Kenna all the time.” He had no idea how parents survived without ten-year-old nieces and cheery teenagers.

“It’s not a babysitter I need.” Marcus was practically growling. “It’s a nice family in Fisher’s Cove willing to take in an infant until we can track down who she belongs to.”

That had been Jamie’s assignment. “No one’s looking for her.”

The monk’s eyes sharpened. “Are you sure?”

Checked and rechecked. “Yup. Nothing on the witch airwaves, and no reports of a missing baby.” He had good cop sources in North America and witches reading the ether elsewhere. “And Adele says she’s yours, free and clear.”

One very unmonk-like snort. “And you believe a Las Vegas fraud?”

Yeah. He did. “She’s different, Marcus-but I don’t think she’s lying. And it took some serious magic to get her into Realm.” The kind that was still keeping him awake at night-young girls he loved called Realm their sandbox. His eyes were bleeding from coding new wards on the site.

And Daniel had still been logged in at 3 a.m.

“How did we not know about a witch under our noses with that kind of power? And does she have to ruin all our reputations with bad infomercials?”

Shit. Oh, crap. Jamie cursed imperfect message delivery and pulled Marcus down a quiet alley. “Adele’s not the one with the power.”

Blazing anger streaked through Realm-for a nano-second. And then it was gone, the monk’s Fort Knox barriers and slightly uneven breathing the only sign at all that he’d heard Jamie’s words. “You think Evan’s the one with the magic.”

Neck deep in quicksand, Jamie just nodded. And tried to imagine Devin dead and gone and sending messages-to someone else. Bloody hell. “Maybe he *can’t* talk to *you*.”

Marcus’s mind thermometer dropped twenty degrees, and he turned to leave the alley. “I came here to take a break. This wasn’t how I planned to spend it.”

Okay, witch in denial. Time to backpedal. Hard. “Want some tips on how to play the game in fifteen-minute segments? I’ve had a lot of practice in the last six months.”

The monk snorted, slivers of warmth easing back into his mind. “How do you manage to get fifteen whole minutes?”

Phew. Jamie considered erecting neon-orange “STAY OUT” tape around Marcus’s mind-but given that he was the most feeble mind witch on the continent, everyone else with talent had probably already figured that out. “The triplets can usually buy me that long. At least your kiddo doesn’t start fires every time she sneezes.”

Marcus winced. “I hadn’t heard that.”

“She grew out of it about a month ago.” Jamie sighed. With Kenna, that kind of change wasn’t usually a good thing. “Now she messes with gravitational fields instead. Be glad you got a baby without magic. Poop’s easy.”

He had no idea why Marcus’s mind suddenly got uneasy. Poop really wasn’t all that hard.

***

He'd gotten twenty minutes. Marcus looked down at the wailing child on the blanket and sighed. Twenty minutes was just long enough to get cocky and position your troops for all the world to see.

Odds were good that Warrior Girl was going to spy his attack formation long before he got back to Realm. And if she outfitted them in bunny slippers again, he was going to bottle Morgan's wail and broadcast it at Ginia's keep with the loudest speaker spell he could muster.

Not that the crying wasn't loud enough all by itself. Marcus dismissed Lizzie with a wave of his hand. No point both of them going deaf. *Enough, child. This contraption takes time to put on. Keep wailing like that and I'll leave you out for lobster bait.*

The baby's shrieking stopped in its tracks. *Scared of lobsters, are you? Smart girl.* Marcus started the acrobatics necessary to get Morgan settled into the pouch.

Dammit. When had she become "Morgan"? "Girl-child" sounded far less… permanent.

He couldn't keep a baby, no matter what all the powers of heaven, earth, and parts in between had to say. He got a vote, the only one that mattered.

A leg kicked up out of the pouch. Morgan wasn't going about her usual business of snuggling in. *What's the matter-rethinking the lobsters?* A second leg joined the first.

It was the hind end protesting. Maybe she was wet. Gingerly, he poked a finger in the general direction of her bottom. No obvious puddles, and he wasn't up to dealing with the non-emergency kind.

Which left food and long walks on the beach. *Didn't you get a bottle a couple of hours ago?* He headed to the kitchen. Someone much more familiar with baby feeding habits always seemed to deliver a bottle when he needed one.

Which was good, because he was never, ever having a conversation about baby milk.

Or how it got in bottles on his counter.

See, this is how they torture me. He shoveled the bottle in the general direction of Morgan's mouth, and watched in amusement as all four limbs clutched it like manna from heaven. *What, now you're a baby monkey?*

The naked toes wiggled in contented bliss. Marcus was quite sure he'd never seen them before. *Lost your socks, did you?*

All he got in reply were elephant-sized sucking sounds. No wonder the kid burped like a beer-guzzling biker.

He watched as her eyelids started to droop. Milk was like a baby sleep drug. Giving in to odd temptation, he ran a finger down her

cheek, wiping away the milk dribbles. And then, very carefully, not thinking about why, set a monitoring spell.

Basic common sense. Nothing more.

Chapter 8

Some moon harvestings were quiet and reverent. This one was anything but. Sophie looked over at her companion and chuckled. “If the giggles get any louder, we’ll wake up half the village.”

Moira smiled, waving a quick incantation before she picked another bit of lemon balm. “Fisher’s Cove is well used to strange happenings in the night. The girls are just excited.”

Either that or they’d sniffed a little too much magically powered mint. Sophie grinned, watching Lizzie hop lightly over the gathering basket. “Don’t spill what we’ve gathered, wild child.”

“We won’t.” Ginia grinned as she hopped over the basket too, albeit with a lot more clearance than her younger friend. “Is it time for us to start the special moon gathering yet?”

Moira looked up at the sky. “Just a few more minutes now. We want to wait until her face is right where she can see us.”

Lizzie tilted her head sideways. “I don’t see any eyes on the moon.”

“They’re not the kind of eyes we can see, silly.” Ginia crouched down, kindness taking any sting out of the words. “They’re eyes that we feel in our hearts.”

It was one of the better explanations of magic Sophie had ever heard.

“My mom has those kind of eyes. She says they’re in the back of her head.” Lizzie stared up, suddenly suspicious. “She can see stuff I do even when I’m on the other side of the village. How come the moon can’t do that?”

Moira chuckled. “Perhaps she can, child. All the more reason not to tip over the basket.”

Ginia picked up a handful of stems. “Does the moon like flower wreaths? Maybe Lizzie and I can braid some.”

“I haven’t danced with flowers in my hair for ages.” Moira dropped an approving kiss on two small heads-and then winked at Sophie. “And no turning it into physical therapy for old hands, either.”

It had only been an idea. One Sophie rapidly tossed overboard. Tonight was for magic.

Lizzie sat down, exuberance happily traded for a heap of flower stems. “So, I checked. Uncle Mike has lots of ear hairs. He must be a really good daddy.”

Sophie rolled her eyes and was grateful both the moon and her husband had high tolerance for small-girl hijinks.

Moira, chuckling, leaned over and picked several stems out of Lizzie’s lap. “Twist them together like so, darling girl. We want them to stay together while we dance.”

Apparently teaching could go where physical therapy didn’t dare. Ginia, braid already forming under her skilled fingers, grinned at Sophie. When Moira had that twinkle in her eye, all was right in the healer world.

Sophie breathed in the cool air of a late spring night-and gave thanks. To the flowers, and the hands, young and old, that had kept Moira’s brain alive.

They still needed her heart. The witching world wasn’t ready to lose its matriarch, even with several candidates in training.

Ginia, always sensitive to the unsaid, grabbed Lizzie’s hand. “Let’s go get some of the special cornflowers for Aunt Moira’s crown.” She glanced at the flowers’ owner. “Can we?”

“Get some for all of us.” Moira reached out and touched two shiny cheeks. “They’re such a pretty blue-they’ll match your eyes.”

The girls sped off, racing toward the patch of the best-tended flowers in the witch universe. It had been cornflowers under Moira’s hands when she’d fallen in her garden. And every witch with even a mote of earth talent had poured their love into that patch of blue ever since.

“We should harvest some extra. A nice bouquet for my nephew’s windowsill.”

Sophie hoped Marcus never found out how much healer meddling snuck in right under his nose. “We could add some of the pretty clematis that matches Morgan’s eyes.” And opened deep heart channels, given enough time. She’d set Lizzie to tending that patch too.

“He’s warming to wee Morgan.” Moira’s hands continued to braid. “Slowly, but he’s stopped trying to find any woman in the village ready to take her.”

Even Marcus couldn’t be totally blind to the united wall of womanhood he faced. “He’s learning how to take care of her. The bottles keep coming back empty.”

“Mmm. Not sure if he’s learning, or just bribing Lizzie to do it instead.” Moira looked less than pleased by the most recent rumors.

Sophie nodded, understanding, but she'd picked up a key piece of intelligence-one that evidently Moira's sources had missed. She checked to make sure the girls were still down at the other end of the garden. "Know what he's bribing her *with*?"

Moira frowned.

"A saber." Sophie grinned. "Top of the line, with lights *and* Darth Vader sound effects."

It took a moment for realization to dawn-Darth Vader wasn't a cultural icon for old Irish women. "Those things the twins wave around?" Moira's smile bloomed. "Our Lizzie's been wanting one of those since the moment they were unwrapped. Smart little devil, she is."

That was the very best part. "It wasn't Lizzie's idea."

Moira froze, a hydrangea stem in her fingers. "*Marcus* thought of that?"

Sophie nodded-and waited.

And watched as the shock on Moira's face shifted into something deeper and more vulnerable. "He's opening. The babe-she heals him."

Sophie hoped fervently it would be that simple. It wasn't only Marcus carrying heavy scars. "He has a long journey."

"Aye, I know." Moira's face, turned up to the moon, held joy. "But tonight, we can celebrate what has begun."

It was what healers did.

***

Cold. Everything was so very, very cold. Marcus clutched his scabby knees, willing the mists to go away. They'd taken Evan-and they kept coming back for him.

He cowered under his bed, watching mist-laden fingers crawling toward his toes. If you screamed, they just came faster.

And somewhere in the distance-laughter. The mists knew he was weak.

Maybe it was time to let them eat him. Just like they'd eaten Evan.

And then the cold touched his toes and the pain hurtled Marcus out of his ball of fear.

You can't have me!

Desperate now, he pulled magic into his puny hands. Water power just made the mists grow, so it was air he pulled. He'd been practicing, every hour of every day. Maybe tonight, it would finally be

enough.

For one moment of terrible hope, the mists hesitated.

And then he knew, just like he always did. He wasn't strong enough. Marcus lunged out of his bed, howling at the mists and the cold and the awful noise ringing in his ears.

And realized it wasn't his bed, he wasn't five-and the child in his arms was ice cold.

Morgan! He pushed for her mind, as hard as he dared. *MORGAN!*

Her whimper cut through the shrilling alarm, the cold, and the icy fear in his heart. She wasn't gone. The mists hadn't taken her. He could feel her now, drowsy, unhappy, and oh, so cold.

With a clenched fist, he waved off the monitoring spell's red alert. It had done its job.

Lurching to the door, he sucked in great, gulping swallows of night air. No mists in sight-just a day-bright moon. Clutching Morgan to his chest, he ran under its cool light. He needed a healer. Now.

***

Moira added one last cornflower to Lizzie's wreath. Perfect. Just right for a little girl's first moon dance. "Try it on, sweetheart." She lifted it up-and realized she was about to crown thin air.

Lizzie was flying toward the garden gate, calling power as she ran. Sophie was three steps ahead of her.

The madman charging in nearly trampled them both.

Marcus.

Blessed Mother.

"I need a healer." It was his voice, ravaged beyond all recognition, that got her knees moving again.

But it was Sophie who caught him first. "We're here, Marcus. We're all here. Let me touch her." Gentle hands reached for the baby he clutched to his chest.

Moira stepped forward. Morgan wasn't their only patient. Marcus was as close to catatonic shock as she'd ever seen in a man still standing. "Bring him inside. Now. We can tend to the child there." She tucked a hand under his arm-and discovered what it was to try to move a mountain.

It was Lizzie that got his feet moving. "Just one step at a time, Uncle Marcus. It's nice and warm inside. Morgan needs us to warm her up a little. Take a step for me, now."

A few lurching paces more and they had Marcus on her ample

couch, Lizzie still clutching his hand. Ginia squeezed Moira's hand and dashed for the door, in search of warm milk. Bless Elorie's ample supply.

Sophie was bent over the baby, working around the two arms of steel that refused to let Morgan go. Already her skin was pinking up nicely. "Just cold, aren't you, sweet girl. We'll get you fixed up in no time."

It was Marcus who had Moira scared. His skin was the terrible gray of a man two days dead.

Sophie laid a hand on Morgan's head one last time, and then moved on to her next patient. Carefully, she set up a healing aura-and Moira smiled in impressed approval as she looped in both the baby and young Lizzie. Healers learned to find power in unexpected places.

Her eyes glanced over at Moira, and lit with humor. "We could use that, too."

Moira looked down and realized she still clutched Lizzie's wreath-bedecked in magic-soaked cornflowers. Hands shaking like spring petals in a stiff wind, she stretched it out to her nephew's head. A gift of moondust and love.

Lizzie grinned up at him. "You look really lovely tonight, Uncle Marcus."

The ghostly smile that cracked his face was the most beautiful sight Moira had seen in a very long time.

Their smallest healer touched his cheek-and began to sing.

"The moon shines bright, the baby sleeps

A warm and happy dream in creeps-"

Moira tried not to laugh. The little imp was trying to cast a sleep spell, and a very sneaky one, too. "Not just yet, sweetheart. Sophie needs a little more time to work, and we need to ask Marcus a few questions."

Lizzie frowned. "Are you sure that's a good idea? He seems awfully tired."

Moira nodded in approval. It was good for healers to ask questions. "He needs sleep, lovely girl-but he also needs for us to help him keep Morgan safe. And perhaps you can get him to drink a nice cup of tea, too." One laced with a few things her nephew hopefully wouldn't recognize.

I'm smart enough not to drink healer tea.

The mindvoice was raspy, like it hadn't been used in a decade-but it warmed the very cockles of Moira's heart. "You'll drink what we give you. When you've a wee one depending on you, you can't act like a difficult child."

Sparks flashed in Marcus's eyes, and something approaching healthy color flooded his cheeks. Sophie grinned and kept her head

down, quietly healing while he was otherwise distracted.

Ah, it was good to be useful. Moira eyed her nephew. “Lizzie, if he gets at all disagreeable, fetch me that bottle of stinking-lily tincture.” It actually tasted rather mild, but no one ever doubted the name.

“I’m not your patient.” He scowled down at the child in his arms. “She is.”

One tiny foot kicked in apparent disagreement.

Moira had to agree with the babe-at the moment, her keeper looked the far worse for wear. She looked up as Ginia skated into the room, bottle in her hand. “Well, this ought to fix up anything else that ails her.”

Marcus held out the child, his arms still shaking like leaves.

Ginia, healer instincts far wiser than her years, simply handed him the bottle.

Moira knew better than to cheer out loud when he took it. She listened for the first sounds of suckling, and then touched his arm gently. There were things they needed to know before his strength gave out entirely. “Tell us what happened.”

“I don’t have any damn idea.”

She wondered if he had any clue how much fear and denial oozed out the cracks in his voice. “Just tell us what you know.”

“She was cold. I woke up, and she was a block of ice.”

Sophie leaned over and brushed Morgan’s forehead. “Has it happened before?”

Moira saw “no” die on Marcus’s lips. “Perhaps once. We were sleeping in the chair in my living room the first night she arrived. I thought I’d simply been incompetent and not dressed her warmly enough.”

His eyes dared them to push him any further.

Moira had never been afraid to take a dare. “Out with it, Marcus Grimald Buchanan. All of it. Help us keep her safe.”

He gazed down at the baby, happily gorging in his arms. And squeezed his eyes shut. “The mists. I dreamed of the mists tonight.”

Her heart tore in two at his pain. She nodded at Lizzie. It was time for him to sleep.

Moira reached for the baby in his arms. “I’ll rock her a while.” She waited for her nephew’s glazed eyes to look up. The terrible power of astral travel had returned in Fisher’s Cove-and she had something to say. Words forty-three years in the making.

“She’ll be safe for tonight. The mists will not get past me twice.”

***

Sophie looked over at the adorable pile of snoring man and six-year-old healer, and got up to slide a pillow under Lizzie's head.

"She did the work of a full-grown healer tonight," said Moira softly, rocking. "You've done beautifully with her training. Ginia's as well."

Ginia had been sent home, protesting, with promises that she could boss Marcus around in the morning. "I'm only passing on what was given to me." Sophie smiled over at her oldest teacher.

"We've need of them." Moira touched a soft baby cheek. "It seems this generation of witches finds trouble as easily as the last."

Sophie watched and worried. A stroke hadn't felled the grandmother of her heart-but another traveler lost just might. Especially a tiny, defenseless baby. "You should get some rest." Morgan would be safe-Mike had set the monitoring wards himself when he'd brought Adam by for a refill. Her husband's spells tended toward the Fort Knox variety. If anything magical so much as whiffed Morgan's direction, they'd know.

Moira continued to rock gently. "I'll sit here a while yet. We old witches don't need as much sleep as all you new mothers."

"You've always been the guardian of the night." Sophie smiled when old eyes looked up in surprise. "Whenever one of us was sick, or fledging new magic, it was always you in the rocking chair, watching and waiting."

"It's healer's work." Moira chuckled quietly. "Look at all of us here, not quite ready to leave our patients."

It was true. Even Lizzie had cast a quick linking spell as she'd nodded off to sleep-if Marcus woke, she'd know.

"Tomorrow's a new day." Sophie repeated the first mantra of healer training. "We've done what we can for tonight." Well, not quite all-she'd take Marcus and Morgan back home before she left. Aunt Moira needed her sleep.

"It was enough." Moira replied with the age-old answer. "Any day you can say that is a good day."

Sophie watched the peaceful duo on the couch, soaking in the moment. It wasn't going to last. "This is going to rock him. I've never felt a brain quite that fractured." At least not in anyone still living.

"It's going to rock all of us." Moira's voice shook with quiet sadness. "Each of us is connected, one to the other-a great web of souls."

It was a lovely and heavy thought. "Witches are more connected than most."

"Aye." Moira gazed at a world far away. "When one of us departs, it pulls at the entire web." Her eyes met Sophie's, gentle and wise.

“Even when we’re old and it’s our time.”

A healer trained, all her life-and the thought of losing Moira tore great gaping holes in Sophie’s heart. “It’s not your time yet.”

“It surely isn’t, my dear-and I’m grateful for every day you’ve added to the time I have. But when it’s my time to go, the web will hold.” Moira looked down at the baby sound asleep in her arms and hitched a breath. “When it’s a child we lose, the web simply tears.”

Tears slid, unbidden, into the night. “I don’t know how to heal that.”

Moira looked up with fierce old guardian eyes. “We fight for the child who still lives.”

Chapter 9

Adam wanted an early morning walk-and Sophie had drawn the short stick. Or rather, Mike hadn't wakened enough to draw a stick, and she hadn't had the heart to wake him.

She pulled the door quietly closed behind her and debated the dawn-lit landscape. "What do you think, sweet boy? Gardens, beach, or a meandering stroll through the village?"

Dark eyes looked up from the wrap she'd swaddled him in. He never seemed to much care, so long as it got him closer to earth and sky. Her child of the outdoor spaces. Probably not shocking, with earth-witch genes traveling from both parents.

Power didn't pass that simply, but it heartened Sophie to think that her baby might have a reason for all his demands, especially ones that involved early morning walks on two hours of sleep.

Not that most of the lost sleep had been his fault. By the time she'd gotten Marcus and Morgan settled back in their cottage on the edge of the village, small pink rays had been venturing over the horizon.

Sophie turned her feet in the direction of Moira's gardens. Maybe she could do a little flower clean-up before the village woke. Or try a soak-Adam loved the hot pool. It was the getting-out part he disliked. Loudly.

Maybe they'd stick to the gardens.

A wail split the dawn silence. Sophie looked down, momentarily confused. No, not Adam. And coming from the front side of Moira's house.

Moving more quickly now, Sophie rounded the side of the cottage-and found a man pulling his hair out. Literally. All while cursing at a basket up on the porch. The one with all Morgan's earthly possessions piled up beside it.

Healers trained to take in a scene in seconds-sometimes life depended on it.

This time, she was tempted to mete out death instead. Three steps

and she swooped Morgan out of the basket. One more and she planted the tight ball of baby fury on Marcus's chest. "What, you think you can dump her on a little old lady and run for the hills?"

His cheeks blazed with color. "I can't do this. I won't."

"So you think Moira should do it instead?"

"There are a hundred people in this village who will help her. They just won't help me."

"Because she told them not to, you great clodding idiot." That got his attention, and Sophie was mad enough to keep using the same club. "The first lesson she teaches all of us, right in the cradle, is about responsibility. She's still trying to beat that one through your thick head."

Red changed to chalk white. Marcus looked down at Morgan and squeezed his eyes shut. "I won't watch her die. I won't be responsible for that. Not again."

Oh, God. Guilt slashed at Sophie's temper. "Nobody working alone has ever called a traveler back. Not ever, Marcus. How could you expect to do it as a boy of five?" She anguished for the mauled boy inside the man. "No one has ever blamed you."

"Imagine it was your baby. Imagine it was Adam who ran into the mists and never came back." Marcus's eyes glittered, his voice sandpaper and blood. "There are no words that would make you feel less responsible."

Horror coated Sophie's soul as the picture he painted hit her in full color.

"I can't live through this again." Every word was a quiet scream of pain. "And the mists won't let me die."

They stood face-to-face, locked in a moment of shared hell-and then Sophie desperately juggled to catch the baby he all but threw at her. She watched, frozen, as he ran, all the hounds of hell at his heels.

And prayed as Morgan howled in reply.

***

Moira flew out of her cottage, a baby's fury and pain giving her legs youth. The last thing she expected to find was Sophie, sheet white and clutching two babies. She reached for the one making all the noise.

Morgan, wrapped in at least three of her hand-knit throws. With cornflowers tucked inside. Blessed Mother. "Did she travel again?"

"No." Sophie pointed down the street. "He's leaving."

When you'd lived more than seventy years, you recognized a crisis of life and death. The village was slowly healing Marcus. If he left, he'd never come back.

Evan, she hadn't been able to hold. She wasn't losing this one.

Moira looked at the shrieking Morgan, swaddled in blankets and healing flowers. "I need a mind witch. A strong one."

"He's currently leaving town." Sophie's voice flooded with helplessness and fear. "Kevin's talents are small."

"Use one of your infernal devices." The howling baby was undoing them all. "Fetch Lauren or Caro. *Now.*" Marcus was nearing the edge of town.

Confusion blanketed Sophie's face, but she was well trained. Sometimes healers had to do first and ask questions later. She began typing frantically into her phone, and not ten seconds later, Lauren materialized beside them, rubbing her eyes.

"Broadcast the baby." Moira snapped the order, needing instant results-Marcus was nearly at his car door. "Now, Lauren. As loudly as you can."

One half-awake witch gaped in astonishment-and Morgan's cries transmitted through the village, a thousand babies loud.

Moira blessed the quick obedience and stared down the street. Hell and salvation have come for you, nephew. Time to choose.

Two women joined her, shoulder to shoulder.

What the heck is going on? Lauren's mind voice was a lot more awake now.

Sophie rocked Adam, her hands over his ears. *Marcus is trying to run. Aunt Moira's just played our ace card to call him back.*

Ah. The megaphone broadcasting Morgan's screams instantly shut off. *Then let's try it this way, shall we, and not wake up half the village.*

Command died on Moira's lips as she watched Marcus lurch against his car door, hands over his ears. Clearly the volume hadn't gone down for him.

Lauren stood straighter, face taut with effort. *He's fighting to close his mind barriers.*

Moira stood, wailing girl in her arms, and willed light into the battle for her nephew's soul. *Cry, sweet girl. Remind him that you live.*

A stray tear leaked down Lauren's cheek. *He hurts. Oh, holy God, he hurts.*

Touching a wounded mind was pain a healer understood all too well. Moira reached for Lauren's hand, sending her strength. *We can't heal him if he leaves.*

Then I need more. Lauren reached for Morgan. *Her mind does more than cry. She calls him.*

Morgan's cries cut off, the silence nearly knocking Moira to her

knees. Bright lavender eyes stared at Lauren, who grinned even as her face strained in effort. “You’re one smart cookie, little girl. Let’s hit him with everything we’ve got.”

Everything. Morgan wasn’t everything.

There was more to give. Moira faced her nephew, far down the street, and called to all the magic still hers to command.

“I call on water and earth, dear to me
I offer up this message three.
An old woman’s love for boy and man,
A healer’s need to heal and stand.
The call of blood, running deep
A promise made and now to keep.
Carry this, my message three
To ears and heart most dear to me.
Let him open, let him see,
As I will, so mote it be.”

Her eyes hazed, consciousness leaking. She’d reached too hard-even in her youth, that kind of power hadn’t been hers.

And then strength poured in from the healer beside her.

Moira redoubled her call-and trusted love, freely given, to hold her up.

***

Lauren felt the moment they won, the tiny girl and the old woman.

The hiccup in time when a mad fight to survive and flee gave way to beaten acceptance.

She dialed down the volume-Marcus wasn’t resisting now. He wasn’t anything at all. With the slow, shuffling gait of a man about to meet his hundredth birthday, Marcus inched back down the street. One foot, then another, reeled in by the twin ropes of love and need coming from Moira and Morgan.

It was the saddest magic Lauren had ever seen.

Tears leaked down Moira’s cheeks. “He comes.”

He did. But not for himself. There was nothing of Marcus in the shell of a man walking up the road. “He comes for you. And the baby.”

Sophie nodded quietly. “It’s enough that he comes.”

Lauren tightened her barriers. The vacant pain in his mind was overwhelming. “He’s broken, Soph. I’ve never felt anything like it.”

And it killed her to think she might be responsible.

"You did right." Moira's hand slid firm in hers. "We had to ask-and I'm sorry for it."

She'd blindly followed orders and blasted hell at another mind-one in agony before she'd even started. All because she trusted the old woman who loved him.

Lauren suddenly longed for the warm arms and reckless heart of the man who loved her.

She watched the pathetic shuffle, Marcus's eyes glued to the baby in her arms. "He's not going to make it all the way back."

Moira's hand turned to steel. "He needs to come all the way. On his own."

No. She wasn't holding a drowning man under water any longer. Ducking out from Moira's hand, Lauren moved to unite him with his life raft.

"Forty-three years." Moira's voice held plea now, and a sadness that melted rebellion. "I've walked down the street to meet him every day of more than four decades. Not once has he ever walked all the way back with me."

The love in her mind punctured Lauren's lungs. Breathless, she cuddled Morgan tight and closed ranks again with the toughest witch she knew. And prayed the gamble worked.

The last steps took a thousand years. Each.

Marcus stopped in front of Lauren-and lifted up arms weighted by an infinity of chains. He took the bundle that was Morgan, blankets, cornflowers, and all. And cradled her in his arms like spun glass.

One man. And the baby who was his.

When he finally looked back up, there were shadows of Marcus in his mind. "Why has this stupid infant picked me?"

Lauren laughed, something akin to joy tickling her ribs. "I have no earthly idea."

***

Nell landed in Sophie's kitchen, a monster plate of Nutella cookies in her hands. Mike stood over the stove, stirring something that smelled like pure heaven. He smiled in greeting and snagged a cookie. "Food'll be ready in a few minutes, but these will probably go over well in the meantime."

They'd better-she'd stolen Jamie's entire backup supply. "How's everyone doing?"

Mike shrugged, light worry lines between his eyes. “I’m hoping you’ll be able to tell me that. My healing talents don’t run to psychology.” He waved at a tray on the counter. “Mind carrying that in?”

Herbal tea-and coffee? Nell frowned. Fisher’s Cove served up a hundred varieties of tea, but getting a good cup of coffee usually required magic or a drive down the road. “Who’s here?”

“Lauren.” Mike raised an eyebrow. “Nobody filled you in?”

Apparently not. Witches weren’t always the best communicators at the crack of dawn. “I thought Marcus tried to leave.”

“Yeah.” Mike added bowls of berries to the tray. “Lauren cracked him over the head with Morgan’s crying and he came back. Or something like that. Sophie was a little vague on the details-Adam was hungry.”

All this before 4 a.m. Berkeley time. Nell covered a yawn with her hand. Next time they were going to fetch a witch who kept more polite hours. She picked up the tray-time to go find out what the heck had happened.

The sheer exhaustion in the living room was obvious before she made it halfway down the hall. Nell stepped into the doorway, surveying the wreckage-moms of five were good at that. A pale Sophie lay on the couch, Adam curled in the crook of her arm. Moira looked twenty years older than the last time Nell had seen her, and Lauren turned toward coffee fumes like a woman halfway across the Sahara.

Yikes.

Nell dispensed coffee, sugar, and quick hugs, and then took a seat and waited for a roomful of witches to recuperate.

It was Lauren, gulping coffee along with her Nutella fix, who recovered first. “Hand out enough of these cookies, and I’m pretty sure you could be president.”

Sophie’s grin was wan, but real. “The world might not live through Aervyn in the White House.”

Jokes were a sign of witch recovery. “Give me some warning next time, and you can have warm, fresh ones.” A sleepy Jamie had thawed the ones in his freezer before sending them over, but a few had crispy edges-he wasn’t at his best at 4 a.m. either.

“None of us had any warning.” Moira still sounded like she’d been up a week. “’Twas Sophie who found Marcus leaving in the first light of morning. The rest of us got rather rude awakenings.”

Nell listened as three voices filled in snippets of the story. And listened harder to what wasn’t said. “Where are Marcus and Morgan now?”

“Napping.” Sophie was beginning to look more human. “Mike hit them both with a sleep spell, and he’s not very subtle.”

“So he tried to ditch the baby and leave town, you dragged him back by the ear hairs, and he’s going to wake up with a headache and a baby who can travel snuggled in his arms?”

Sophie winced. “Yeah.”

“We don’t know that Morgan can reach the astral plane.” Moira gripped her teacup like a lifeline. “Only that she might.”

Nell knew the levels of traveler magic-she’d lived in vigilant fear of them for Aervyn’s first three years. Some babies just got cold, touched in passing by the mists. Some floated, still firmly tethered to their bodies. Only a terrifying few stretched that connection to the whisper-thin strand necessary to reach the astral plane. But to a parent holding a cold child in their arms, it was a possibility that caused jibbering terror. Only a few would truly travel-but most of those didn’t come back. Whisper-thin cords broke all too easily.

And Morgan had gotten cold twice now.

A quick tug on fire power and Nell pumped more heat into the living room. It wouldn’t help Morgan-but it might help the rest of them clutching coffee and tea, yearning for warmth.

“Thank you, my dear.” Moira gazed into her tea, an old witch seeking answers to the unknowable.

Nell stared into the liquid depths of her own cup. The most solitary witch she knew, responsible for a baby with the potential for life-threatening magic. And so many hearts helpless on the sidelines.

Nell knew her job now. “I’ll get Jamie and Daniel on organizing a standby circle.” They had about twelve hours until dusk. That should be plenty of time-travelers were safe during the day.

Three witches stared at her, astonished.

“We’ve enough witches to watch her from here.” Moira cozied her feet under a soft green blanket. “A monitoring spell’s easy enough to set.”

“The circle’s not for Morgan.” Nell reached for another cookie. “It’s for Marcus.”

It was Lauren who connected the dots first-quietly. *A sense of power for him. And it will give a lot of unhappy witches something to do.*

Yup. Sitting watch would help keep the feelings of impotence at bay. *We’ll have enough volunteers for three circles.*

The light slowly dawned in Sophie’s eyes. “He needs to know we’re there for him. Ready.”

Nell nodded. “Yes. Ready, but not too close. We’ll use Realm-give him some panic buttons to push.” A circle in waiting, a finger tap away.

“You’ve such wisdom in you, my dear.” Moira’s eyes finally had some of her usual zip in them. “And enough Irish canniness to make my gran proud.”

“Are you calling me a sneaky witch?” Nell grinned-she’d learned from the best. “I figure he won’t tolerate the usual variety of witch invasion. So we’ll use the back door.” The witches who loved him needed one.

And even if the world’s crankiest witch didn’t realize it, he needed one too. Nell knew what it was to fear the magic running through your baby’s veins.

You needed love at your back.

Chapter 10

Something tickled.

Marcus swatted at the irritating fly.

More annoying tingles, this time on the other side. Again, his brain sent the annoyed command to swat. His arm, however, appeared to be missing.

And his eyes were fused shut.

A warm hand dropped to his forehead, cheerful words invading his morning. “Sorry, forgot about your eyes. Mike’s sleep spells are kind of strong.” Another tickle, stronger this time, and the owner of the good cheer came into view.

Marcus growled-he was in no mood for girl healers. “Go away.”

“Can’t.” Her hands moved quickly now, one hovering over his main channel flows, the other checking the warm, baby-shaped lump draped over his arm. “Somebody needs to make sure you two survive until breakfast.”

He refused to ask how the baby was doing, but Ginia’s mind seemed unconcerned. And Morgan’s drifted in the light haze of dreaming sleep.

A state she would probably stay in as long as he was willing to be used as a human pillow. Budge an inch and she’d wail like an opera singer, but the starving monster chewing on his intestines wasn’t going to wait patiently, dammit.

“Drink this.” A cool glass slid into his right hand. “I have a bottle for when she wakes up, and Aaron’s bringing scones over in a few minutes. If you behave, you can have a blueberry one.”

Marcus stared at the green goo in disgust. No way in hell he was drinking that. And why did all healers treat him like a toddler? “I’m perfectly fine, and more than capable of making my own breakfast.”

“Uh, huh.” Ginia’s eyes danced with early-morning humor. “I thought you knew how to launch a decent Realm attack, too. What were you thinking, leaving all your castle guards hanging out in the meadow like that?” She did something sharp to his missing arm and

all the feeling flowed back in. “Someone might come along and turn all their swords into flowers or something.”

Marcus groaned, wondering what he’d done to deserve annoying preteen girls in his life. “I had to leave rather unexpectedly.” Babies had no respect for game play. And apparently, his next visit was going to be spent trying to reverse engineer whatever mischief Warrior Girl had unleashed on his guards.

Flowers were probably the least of it.

“Drink the goo. You need it after yesterday.” Ginia touched the frown on his forehead. “I moved them back to your keep.”

What?

She shrugged. “Uncle Jamie has to leave Realm all the time when Kenna cries, too, so we have an unofficial rule on level seven now-kind of like a baby time-out.”

She tapped the glass. Marcus sipped. It wasn’t entirely awful.

Ginia bent over and picked up a tiny sock off the floor. “Nobody messes with the dads’ stuff until they get back. People don’t all know you have a baby yet, so I moved your guards.”

Hecate’s hells. He wasn’t a father, and he didn’t have a baby. She wasn’t staying. “I don’t require any special treatment.” Marcus pulled his arm out and dumped the suddenly protesting Morgan into Ginia’s arms. “I suggest you use that bottle you brought.” He was going to acquire himself some industrial-strength earplugs.

No crying baby was going to undo his sanity.

And she wasn’t staying.

Four-and-a-half feet of fury stuffed a squalling girl-child right back at his chest. “You can have all the bad manners you want, but she’s your baby and you know it.” Ginia’s eyes were a miniature version of her mother’s. “And if you don’t feed her, right now, I’m going to turn every single one of your castle soldiers into poopy pink pigs.”

Gods. Even Morgan had stopped her wailing in the face of Warrior-Girl-healer wrath. Marcus popped the bottle in the baby’s mouth. That had been a very creative threat, and she’d clearly meant every word.

He tried very hard not to be amused.

And even harder not to respond to the small girl radiating simple happiness in his arms.

***

Marcus pulled his cowl closer around his neck. Normally he wasn't the Realm-skulking type, but people with napping babies who could awaken at any moment needed new strategies.

No way was he leaving himself open to Warrior Girl rescue again.

"You seem cheerful this morning."

Marcus looked over at his uninvited company and scowled. It was hard to skulk accompanied by a gypsy dressed in flamboyant purple. "Don't you have a quieter avatar you can use?"

Jamie grinned and shrugged, turning to show the infant riding in some contraption on his back. "The munchkin likes this one. Apparently all girls come programmed to prefer gaudy colors."

Ha. The gypsy costume long predated Jamie's little girl. "I'm busy."

"So I see." Jamie eyed the spellcubes in Marcus's hands. "Who are you listening in on?"

Marcus sighed and tossed the eavesdroppers back in his rucksack. The darned things were easy to build and bloody difficult to deploy, thanks to their highly recognizable spellshape. "No one."

The gypsy squinted out into the street, empty except for a quiet little librarian-and grinned. "It's about time someone started paying attention to him."

They watched as Kevin's primary game avatar walked down the street, touching the walls of each building and muttering. All while reading out of the old book in his hand.

The old book that radiated magic.

Marcus frowned. It took a lot of game points to bring magical objects into the highest level. "What's that thing do?"

"Dunno." Jamie shrugged, eyes intently curious. "Never seen it before."

Marcus snorted-magical objects didn't just pop into Realm fully formed. Carefully, he pulled a spellcube back out of his sack. Mysterious happenings tended to be bad for the level's top-ranked players. No one ever worried about the lowly librarians until it was too late.

He wondered if Kevin knew he walked in gigantic shoes. The game's best-ever non-witch player had also preferred a librarian guise.

"He knows." Jamie grinned. "He's easily the game's best historian. Question is, how many of the people in this level remember The Hacker?"

Those who didn't forgot at their peril. "Kevin doesn't have Daniel's coding skills."

"Nope." Jamie started the odd dance parents used to soothe fussy babies. Kenna quieted on his back. "But he watches and learns, and he's dug some very interesting stuff out of the code archives."

No one in their right mind ventured into the archives-that was where lines of code went to die, much of it material that had never worked properly in the first place. “Is it safe in there?”

“Mostly,” said Jamie wryly. “Activating it is a different story, but so far he’s been very careful.”

Marcus shook his head. “The boy just needs some good coding lessons. No point digging around in the old relics.”

Jamie snickered. “Don’t let Moira hear you say that.”

He had due respect for the past, but unlike most of the denizens of Fisher’s Cove, no desire to live there. Then again, his present had gotten rather inhospitable as well. Marcus sighed. So much for a few moments of mindless escape.

“Sorry.” The gypsy’s eyes were full of purple-hued empathy. “The first few weeks are hard.”

Weeks? He’d barely made it through two days. “I’m not cut out to care for a child.”

“None of us really are.” In a move that resembled Houdini exiting a straitjacket, Jamie slid the contraption holding a very sleepy Kenna around to his front and snugged her in to his chest. “And you didn’t get an easy draw.”

“It appears I have no choice in the matter.” Marcus winced at the whine in his voice.

“Sure you do.” Jamie’s eyes held something a lot steelier now. “And you already made it. You came back.”

It had hardly seemed like a choice.

Jamie brushed at random bricks on the wall. “We have a circle on standby for you, if you need it. The triplets are designing a bat-signal app for your phone.”

It would probably be pink. Marcus resisted the relief trying to creep into his gut. A circle didn’t always work-the mists had unspeakable power.

The gypsy stroked his girl-child’s fuzzy head. “Morgan’s safety lies with all of us, Marcus.”

“It might not be enough.” It could easily not be enough. And thinking that way would only make him crazy. He kicked an errant pebble in the dirt. “I have to go back. She’ll probably be waking up soon.”

Silence.

Marcus looked up-and finally figured out what it was in Jamie’s eyes.

Understanding. And respect.

***

Nell lowered herself into the hammock, smiling as the sides rose up around her. Her own personal cocoon.

She remembered the day Daniel had strung it for her. Aervyn had been about three months old and porting to random locations in his sleep. While starting fires. She'd been exhausted, running on magical fumes, and terrified for her tiny boy's safety.

And then her husband had taken her by the hand, led her out to a quiet corner of the back yard, and tucked her into her very own escape pod. There were few moments in her life when she'd loved him more.

A hand, bearing brownies, appeared over the edge of the hammock. "Want company?"

She scootched up to one end-they'd figured out how to get both of them into the escape pod long ago. "You brought chocolate. What broke?" The last time he'd arrived bearing brownies, it had been a follow up to teaching Aervyn the finer points of a knuckleball pitch. The heirloom vase had not been impressed-although as Gramma Retha had pointed out, it had encountered errant baseballs more than once in the past. Being a Sullivan family heirloom was risky business.

Daniel climbed in and handed over the much bigger brownie. "Nothing that I know of. Lull in the storm. Nathan took Aervyn to the park to climb trees, Mia and Shay are coding, and Ginia's snoring on the living room couch."

None of her children ever napped in their beds. "Did you remind Aervyn not to port the neighborhood kids again?" Not all mothers greeted the sight of their child twenty feet up a tree with equanimity.

"Yup." Her husband grinned. "I even did it before I gave him his brownie. Do I get bonus dad points for that?"

Nell chuckled. "Not enough to make up for feeding him brownies an hour before lunch."

"Says the woman who used to exist on Doritos." Daniel shook his head in mock disbelief. "I know our marriage vows had lots of stuff about sickness and health and getting old, but nowhere in there did it say anything about you getting all responsible and nutritionally concerned on me."

She stuck a foot out of the hammock to start them gently swinging. "I'll give you a pass on the brownies, but I've always been responsible."

He reached for her fingers. "I know." His eyes held all the reasons why he loved her. "And I'm guessing that a baby girl with purple eyes is bringing back a lot of memories for my very responsible wife."

She was. "It's why I came out here, I guess."

"No child arrives with the promise that they'll always be safe."

“I know.” Nell squeezed the hand that had always been there for her. “But with some, the dangers are right in your face.”

“If we let them be.” Daniel picked brownie crumbs off her belly.

“Choose life unafraid.” Nell repeated the three words he’d given her the day Aervyn had entered the world in fire and storm. They’d been her lifeline ever since-even on the days fear pummeled her chest and stole her air.

He nodded. “We do it. Your brother’s doing it.”

“Nat helps.” Nell offered her last crumbles. “She knows how to breathe through fear better than anyone I know.” Her sister-in-law was one very tough cookie-and she kept Jamie’s feet on rock-solid ground.

“Kenna’s a lucky kid.” Her husband’s eyes shadowed some. “I wonder what Morgan’s story is. Maybe she wasn’t so lucky.”

That, they didn’t know-but Nell knew her guy. “A sweetheart with lavender eyes is wrapping you around her little finger, is she?”

“She looks like our girls. Fuzzy hair and big eyes.” His fingers laced in hers again. “And Marcus looks like he’s been hit by a Mack truck.”

“Yeah.” And she was still trying to wrap her head around how that had happened. “I hope Evan knows what he’s doing.”

Daniel just shook his head, amused. “You’re second-guessing a ghost?”

She grinned. Probably a waste of time-especially when she was curled up in an escape pod with her husband and all five children were otherwise occupied. “Nope. But I am wondering just why you came out here.”

His chuckle sent familiar need curling in her belly. “Took you long enough to figure that out.”

***

Marcus looked up at the sound of his front door bursting open, wondering who they’d sent to keep tabs on him now. Not that it mattered-a baby who howled if he left the room made it difficult to shower or brush his teeth, much less run for the hills.

He wondered, only somewhat idly, if there was a spell for permanent deafness. Good for loud babies, and probably somewhat discouraging of visitors as well.

Whoever it was wasn’t trying very hard to find him-the cottage was tiny.

He looked down at the small girl tied to his chest, put down the carrot peeler, and sighed. “It appears my nice, peaceful salad is about to be interrupted. Let’s go find the interloper, shall we?”

It had always perplexed him that people insisted on conversing with infants who clearly didn’t understand a word they said. Now he understood it as a desperate attempt to hold on to the last remnants of a saner world.

One not limited to sleep and poop.

Perhaps the new visitor would be willing to change the next diaper. Morgan produced one every day at 4 p.m. like clockwork.

He gave his almost-ready salad one last wistful glance and headed down the hall. “Who goes there?”

“Hi, Uncle Marcus. I brought you flowers.”

Marcus left-turned toward the invader in his living room. Sure enough, there stood Lizzie, an enormous armful of flowers making a precarious journey, stem by stem, into a vase he was very sure hadn’t come with the cottage.

He was being furnished, like it or not. “Does anyone have any flowers left in their garden?”

The invader giggled. “Gran said I could have as many as I could hold.”

“And who provided the container?” asked Marcus dryly. Might as well identify all the plotters.

“Gran.” Lizzie slid a blindingly orange flower into the vessel in question. “She said it’s an important family treasure and if you break it, she’ll feed you to the fishes.”

On Aunt Moira’s scale of threats, that one was pretty minor. “In that case, perhaps you should carry it over to the inn. Aaron always appreciates fresh flowers.” Marcus had no idea if that was true or not, but Elorie’s husband had better manners, so he’d probably find a use for Lizzie and her flowers.

His pint-sized visitor’s eyes flashed triumph. “I already took him some. Two whole armfuls. Gran says the flowers are really happy this spring.”

Probably had something to do with the hordes of witches raining blessings down on their heads. He was very grateful the flowers had kept Aunt Moira alive-but her garden had become a damned tourist attraction.

One last flower and the table display apparently met with Lizzie’s approval.

He tried for dismissal. “The light sabers aren’t here yet. I’ll send you a message when they are.”

She ignored him, much as he’d expected. “Can I play with Morgan now?”

He looked down at the bundle on his chest. Any more time there and she was going to be permanently attached. “Maybe I can put her down somewhere.”

“Sure.” Lizzie looked around. “Do you have a baby blanket? I’ll spread it out on the floor.”

He had no blessed idea. “I have several of Aunt Moira’s throws. Is one of those acceptable?”

“Uh, huh.” Lizzie was digging around in the bag of mysterious wares they’d first sent him home with. “But Aunt Elorie put one of her floor blankets in here. See?” She pulled out a big, quilted square of seawater-blue fabric. “You can put that down on the floor and lay Morgan on it. I’ll play with her, and you can go find a clean shirt.”

Marcus froze, the baby halfway out of her pouch. “What’s wrong with my shirt?”

Lizzie giggled. “It looks like you’ve been wearing it for a week.” She reached into the bag of baby paraphernalia again, coming back out with an enormous handkerchief-thing covered in pink elephants. “This is a burp cloth. You can use it to try to catch Morgan’s puke if you want. Then you wouldn’t need a clean shirt so often.”

He’d put on a new shirt after Ginia’s departure-he was quite sure. His last clean one, no less. And the burp cloth looked very poorly designed to be a catcher’s mitt. He carefully laid Morgan down on top of the floor blanket. She waved her limbs around like a stuck turtle, but seemed otherwise content.

Lizzie crouched down by the blanket and started to talk in the sing-song voice of a comic-book chipmunk. “Hey, cutie girl. Lizzie-Fizzie came to play with you today. Oh! I see your toes.”

“She refuses to keep her socks on.” It was already a thorn in his side. One of many.

“Babies like to be nakey.” His expert child entertainment chased toes as Morgan drooled happily. “Gran says they come that way to remind us how beautiful we are.”

Foolishness from an old woman who liked to walk barefoot in her flowers.

Lizzie grabbed the baby’s foot and blew some kind of entirely rude nose into its sole.

And then Morgan opened her mouth and giggled. Big, rollicking giggles straight from her toes.

Marcus took a step closer, moth to bright flame. “What did you do?”

“I gave her a raspberry.” Lizzie grinned and demonstrated again, giggling along with her tiny playmate. “See? She likes it.”

“No one else does that with their babies.” Marcus ignored the strange tugs inside his chest.

“That’s cuz they’re still wee tiny. Morgan’s older, so she likes to play.” Lizzie leaned over, pulled up the baby’s shirt, and planted a raspberry on her belly. “I have to go, Morgan-Zorgan, but I’ll come back and play soon.”

She shimmied up from the floor and straight out the door, still making raspberry sounds.

Morgan was older than the other babies? Marcus watched the small girl on the floor, waving her hands around in search of an imaginary friend, and wondered just how much he didn’t know.

Purple eyes stared back at him solemnly.

Gingerly, expecting her to wail at any moment, he reached a hand toward her toes. They curled up around one of his fingers like a little monkey.

They sat there in silence, man and little monkey girl. And then, gripped by momentary insanity, Marcus leaned over and blew a raspberry into her toes.

The giggles that washed over them both were pure magic. The headless demons of hell would have scared him less.

Chapter 11

Jamie walked into the Witches' Lounge bearing beer and pizza. He had no idea why they were having a guy huddle, but he knew what to bring.

Daniel and Mike, sitting on the couch, brightened at the sight of beer.

Jamie tossed two over. "Any idea why we're here?"

"Nope." Mike pulled up the top of the pizza box and rubbed his hands together. "Score-you brought the good stuff."

He had. Middle-of-nowhere Nova Scotia didn't run to greasy deep-dish pizza. Neither did Nat's stomach. Jamie reached over and grabbed a slice. "Brings back memories."

Daniel grinned. "Late-night coding sessions."

Jamie snorted. "You don't get out enough, dude."

"Right. Says the guy who ate at least half of my late-night pizza."

Likely more than half-witches tended to be pizza hogs, and Daniel had put in some serious hours on Realm in the early days.

"You only brought one?" Mike eyed the pizza box mournfully. "We should probably save Aaron a slice."

"Aaron lacks the proper appreciation of grease." Jamie intercepted the drip of cheese goo sliding down his arm. It was pretty much Aaron's only failing, but as guy flaws went, it was a big one.

"Aaron brought steaks," said a wry voice from the door.

The smell that wafted off the plate in his hand had three grown men ready to beg. Jamie held out the pizza box. "Here, have an appetizer."

"I like my arteries actually functioning." Steaks landed on the table, along with cutlery, napkins, and a bottle of screaming hot sauce. "Not all of us can just magic pizza glue out of our systems."

The cheese goo on his arm wasn't looking quite so tasty. Jamie reached for the hot sauce, mildly disgusted. "Spoilsport."

"*He* brought steaks," said Daniel, sticking a fork into one the size of a small house. "*You* brought really tasty cardboard."

Jamie gave the remnants of his pizza one last, sad look and forked a steak. “So are we here just to prove Aaron’s total food domination, or is there another reason?”

Everyone looked at the bearer of the steaks-he was the guy who’d called the meeting.

“Marcus.” That one word changed the mood in the room considerably. “He needs help.”

“He’s got it.” Daniel stole the hot sauce. “You feed him, I give him sling lessons, Jamie’s digging on Morgan’s past, Elorie’s supplying milk, and every witch in Realm is on standby. What’s left?”

“He’s clueless.” Aaron grimaced. “He doesn’t know about burp cloths, Morgan’s diapers are mostly on backwards, and the two of them are sleeping in an easy chair every night.”

Jamie winced-he’d done a couple of nights in an easy chair with Kenna. Not conducive to good sleep. Or walking upright the next day.

Daniel raised an eyebrow. “Sounds like you have spies.”

“Lizzie’s pretty chatty.” Aaron pushed a fork around his plate. “Most of us were pretty dumb when our kids arrived, right?”

There might have been an errant diaper or two. Jamie grinned at his brother-in-law. “At least I didn’t let my two-month-old into the Doritos.” The Nell of twelve years ago had not been impressed.

“It was one chip.” Daniel rolled his eyes. “And it kept him happy for an entire hour. How was I supposed to know it would turn his poop into toxic waste for a whole week?”

Jamie remembered. The whole Walker house had been on quarantine-even Gramma Retha hadn’t been willing to change Dorito diapers for her firstborn grandchild. He looked over at Aaron. “We’ll stipulate to dumb. Where are you headed with this?”

“Marcus probably isn’t any dumber than your average new father.” Aaron stopped at all the raised eyebrows. “Okay, maybe so, but he’s figured some things out.” He put down his fork and sighed. “Here’s the deal. This is going to be hard enough on him without having to learn about diapers and bath time and burp cloths whenever some woman occasionally decides to take random pity on him.”

Mike sighed. “I think they’re mostly taking pity on Morgan.”

“The man’s been an ass.” Daniel tossed a baseball at the ceiling. “He’s been telling people this stuff is women’s work ever since he was old enough to avoid Moira’s cauldron. Most of the women I know figure he deserves to struggle a little.” He shrugged. “I’m not sure they’re wrong.”

“They’re wrong,” said Aaron quietly. “Or rather, they’re right. It’s not theirs to do.”

It was always the quiet guy with the steaks who got you in the end. Jamie leaned forward and stole back the hot sauce. “You think

it's ours."

"Yeah." Aaron intercepted Daniel's ball. "And I think I know how."

***

Marcus contemplated the heap of black shirts on his floor. And the happily naked baby on his bed. "I think, girl-child, that it's time to do laundry." Neither of them had anything remotely respectable to wear, thanks to Morgan's latest poop disaster.

It seemed impossible that so much goop could come out of such a small child. And diapers seemed very poorly designed for the job, given how much escaped them.

He was also a little concerned that the diapers weren't the only thing smelling like poop. And very sure he'd never actually seen anyone bathing an infant. He believed it occurred-but the "how" was entirely a mystery.

He lived in a village full of hot-and-cold helpful women, but damned if he was asking any of them. Marcus juggled Morgan in one arm and scooped up his laptop in the other.

Google-a desperate man's best friend.

Unfortunately, "how to give a baby a bath" produced all kinds of information-but it all required special bath devices or an infant capable of sitting up. He eyed Morgan. She'd never shown any indications of such a skill.

He slid her carefully into the center of his bed and propped her up in something resembling a seated position. It felt like trying to mold Jell-O. "I think you have to put in some effort for this to work, girl-child." He got her into a basic tripod shape and let go. Morgan promptly folded in half, happily chewing on the toe now conveniently under her mouth.

Marcus was pretty sure his mouth and his toe didn't meet under any circumstances. It also seemed clear that Gumby baby hadn't mastered sitting up-and the toe-eating position seemed undesirable in a bathtub full of water.

Curious, he reached for his computer again. Babies sat up unassisted somewhere between three and six months old. "You're not all that much older than the rest of the babies around here, then."

Computer in his lap, he rolled Morgan onto her back. Even for a baby, it couldn't be all that comfortable to be bent in two. She waved her toes happily in the air.

Her slightly stinky toes.

Dammit-babies weren't supposed to stink. Even the cat had run in protest, and that was probably a bad sign.

His email pinged. Marcus ignored it. No way the womenfolk of the village would let him live down a stinky baby. His pride was on the line.

His Google chat pinged. He ignored that too. Someone on the worldwide web had to know how to bathe a three-ish-month-old baby. Maybe if he put just a tiny amount of water in the bathtub, she could lay on her back… And freeze-the heat in his bathroom was intermittent at best.

A big, flashing, neon-orange rectangle popped up on his screen. "DUDE. Check your email. The Fairy Godfathers."

Marcus blinked-and it was gone. Gods. He was hallucinating.

His email pinged again. Annoyed, Marcus clicked into his inbox. And gaped. One new email. With one link. *The Complete Manual of Babies. Brought to you by the Fairy Godfathers.*

He stared. Computer virus? Practical joke?

And then he remembered that he was currently lying on his bed with a mostly naked, stinky baby capable of spreading poop in all four cardinal directions even while fully clothed.

He clicked.

***

Danger stalked her village.

Moira walked out the door of her cottage, uneasy and unable to shake the sense of portent hanging over her shoulder. It wasn't Morgan-the sun shone brightly in the noonday sky. Astral travel was a magic of the night.

A strange car drove up the main street of the village.

Ah. A visitor then. And perhaps, not a welcome one.

Moira moved slowly through her garden, collecting magic as she walked, and then stood by the gate and waited. There was only one way into Fisher's Cove-and it ran through her kitchen.

The stranger got out of her car. A middle-aged woman, slightly frazzled. "Hello-I'm Denise Warren, from Child Protection Services. I've come to see a Marcus Buchanan about a baby?"

Now Moira knew what stalked her village. A woman with a kind face. Wind stirred suddenly in the garden. "Come in for a cup of tea, won't you?"

“Normally that would be lovely.” Denise smiled, hand still on her car door. “But it took me a while to find you way out here, and I really do need to locate Mr. Buchanan.”

No need to send the woman on a wild goose chase. “I’m his aunt. Come in and sit with me, and I’ll send one of the children to find him.” Eventually. A good Irish cup of tea could take a while.

“Thank you. I will, then.” Denise reached into her car and pulled out a bag the size of a small elephant. “If you’ve got something herbal, that would be much appreciated. I’ve had too much coffee today, and it’s got me a bit jittery all of a sudden.”

That was interesting. Obviously Moira wasn’t the only one feeling the portents. And judging from the whispers moving through her flowers, magic stirred. Old magic. Not everyone knew how to listen, but Sophie did-and she would tell anyone else who needed to know.

Relieved, Moira led the way into her kitchen. “I’ve some nice chamomile, and perhaps a cookie or two left in my canister, if you’d like.”

Denise chuckled. “You have grandchildren, do you? Mine always have their hands in the cookie jar.”

Moira revised her estimation of the stranger’s age. “We’ve wee ones aplenty in Fisher’s Cove.” She reached up for tea cups. “Some related by blood and some not, but they all belong with us.”

Denise fingered the soft leaves of her kitchen sage. “I’m not here to take what belongs to you.”

That remained to be seen. “Why are you here, then?”

“I got a message from Mr. Buchanan. He reported that a baby had been left on his doorstep. We’re not open on the weekend, and he didn’t call our crisis line, so I only got the message early this morning. I did call to tell him I was coming, but kept getting his voicemail.”

Betrayal warred with guilt in Moira’s heart. “When did he call you, exactly?”

Denise pulled a well-used day timer out of her voluminous bag and consulted its pages. “10:37 a.m. Saturday.”

Morgan had arrived on Friday night. On Saturday morning, Marcus had been trying to give the baby to anyone who would take her. Moira sighed. And she’d been one step ahead of him, making sure every woman in Fisher’s Cove said no.

Time to clean up the mess she’d helped create.

“Saturday was a bit of a difficult morning. Quite a bit of confusion. It’s entirely possible my nephew didn’t mean to leave you a message.”

“Oh, I most certainly did.”

Moira’s head snapped up at the quiet menace in her nephew’s voice. He stood in her small doorway, his black cloak swirling around

his shoulders. He looked like he'd walked out of a fifteenth-century grimoire-except for the small fuzzy head sticking out of the bundle strapped to his chest.

Marcus scowled, which did nothing to soften his dark and brooding image. *Your flowers talk rather loudly, Aunt Moira. And I'll thank you to stop speaking for me.*

She'd only been trying to help. Moira shuddered-this wasn't a man ready to make the choice he needed to make.

That doesn't give you the right to make it for me. He hammered every word into her heart.

Denise Warren stood up from the table, wide-eyed-and blind to the blood flying in the room. "You're Marcus Buchanan?"

"I am."

Moira put her hands over her heart-and prayed. It was all that was left.

Denise reached out and touched Morgan's head gently. "And this is the baby you want me to collect?"

Marcus just stood, a granite rock with a baby on his chest.

It was Denise who finally broke the silence. "She's beautiful. You've taken good care of her." She tickled naked toes. "And I see she loses her socks, just like my smallest grandson."

"Won't keep them on." Marcus, voice gruff, pulled two wee socks out of his pocket. "I've ordered her some of those sleepers with feet."

Moira blinked in astonishment.

Denise leaned in. "She smells wonderful-what do you use to wash her hair?"

"Some girlie concoction," Marcus growled, cheeks turning a most interesting shade of pink. "She seemed to like it."

"I'm sure you did, didn't you, sweetheart," Denise crooned at the drooly girl. "And you look well fed."

Moira watched her nephew turn forty shades of crimson, and finally found her voice. "We've several nursing mothers in the village with extra supply. She'll never want for milk."

"Not entirely within regulations." Denise winked. "But we can be flexible for the right situation."

Something had righted itself, Moira could feel it. She just had no idea what. "For which situation, exactly?"

Dark brown eyes met hers. "The one we find ourselves in. I'm not in the business of carting off happy babies."

Denise turned to Marcus. "I can file emergency paperwork to designate you as a temporary foster home, authorized to care for one infant. I'll need to come out for regular visits, and we'll require your full cooperation in an attempt to locate her biological parents." She paused, five feet of suddenly daunting grandmother. "If that's what

you want."

The silence was absolute-and it took a decade off Moira's life.

But when Marcus finally nodded, his answer was yes.

***

The news had spread through both Realm and the village like wildfire. Marcus was keeping his baby.

Sophie bounced Adam on her shoulder as they walked through Moira's garden. She'd paged Nell. Time to gather and get the scoop from the single eyewitness.

The flowers were still nattering. Sophie spared a hand from her cranky baby to send them a quick flow of power. *Sleep, lovelies. You've done your job.* She didn't know exactly what it was, yet-but Adam willing, she was about to find out.

Aunt Moira was already settled in the warm waters when they arrived, smiling in welcome.

Sophie grinned at the tea tray poolside-there were a lot of cups. "Been telling your story a few times, have you?"

"The broad details, yes." Moira reached for Adam. "Come here, beautiful boy. Gran wants to hold you."

Visitors to Fisher's Cove could be forgiven for being entirely confused as to which babies were actually related to Moira by blood. Adam wasn't-but nobody remembered that much of the time. "Give me a minute to peel his clothes off."

It didn't take long. Sophie handed him down and then stepped into the pool herself, grateful as always for the warmth. Her baby boy floated on his Gran's gentle hands, calm in a way he rarely was on land. "He so loves it in here."

"As he should." Moira leaned over to drop a kiss on his forehead. "Mayhap it's water power that will flow in his veins."

"Possibly." Sophie smiled softly, long used to the game of guessing future magics. "Or maybe he just likes to float."

"Aye, it could be that, too."

"Aervyn loved to do that." Nell spoke from the edge of the pool, newly arrived and bearing sandwiches. "I heard there's juicy gossip."

"Mmm." Moira leaned back, cradling Adam in her arms. "Sophie tells me I need to spend more time typing. Good physical therapy. Perhaps we can have a chat session later, and I'll tell you all about it."

Sophie snorted-she knew her patients. This one never left juicy news until later.

Nell slid into the water. “Only if I get a soak first. I had to duct tape my girls to the floor to come without them. We have thirty minutes before Daniel releases them.”

“Good gossip takes time.” Moira’s eyes twinkled. “And perhaps a wee bit of food to fuel the talking.”

“You’re putting your audience to sleep,” said Nell wryly.

Sophie grinned at her drowsy boy-child. Some people survived without an Irish grandmother next door. She had no idea how. “So the strange lady showed up to take Morgan away…”

“Hardly.” Nell snorted. “Marcus called her.” She grinned at Moira. “I have my sources.”

“Indeed you do.” Moira smiled down at the baby in her arms. “You forget how innocent they are at this age. And how easy it is to make them happy.”

Sophie resolved to remember that the next time she was walking the floors with a cranky baby at 3 a.m.

“The flowers called him.” Moira looked up. “When Marcus was a small boy, he heard the old magics, just as you do, Sophie. Somehow, in the last forty years, I’d forgotten that.” Her voice quieted. “The old energies were strong this morning. Our Morgan stirs them.”

Sophie shivered. The old magics made most witches very nervous.

“Denise Warren.” Nell reached for another sandwich. “She runs the Halifax Division of Child Protection Services. You got one of the best-Jamie checked.”

“Pfft.” Moira laughed quietly. “She was a grandmother with excellent instincts. Not two minutes in my kitchen and she sized everything up and offered my nephew exactly what he thought he wanted.”

To take Morgan away. Sophie stayed quiet-you didn’t rush a good Irish storyteller.

“It gave me quite the fright, it did.”

Okay, sometimes you prodded the storyteller a bit. “Your channels are still shaky. You called the old magics.”

Moira’s eyes were suddenly those of the village matriarch. “I pulled everything known to me. And I’d do it again.”

That much was obvious. Sophie shook her head and chuckled. “Fierce old crone.”

It landed as the compliment it was meant to be. “We old witches have our uses.” Moira paused, regret settling over her features. “I didn’t trust my nephew enough.”

“You thought he’d let her go.” And that would have been a problem-Morgan was theirs now.

“I did,” said Moira softly. “And it shames me that I couldn’t see what a stranger could.”

“That stranger has a reputation for getting her way.” Nell handed out cookies from some mysterious hiding place. “And it’s possible a few certain someones had their feet on Marcus’s scale.”

Sophie blinked. “It wasn’t any of the witches here.” She’d checked-Marcus’s choice had been freely given, at least in a magical sense.

Nell’s eyes twinkled. “Did you chat with the non-witches? Or your absentee husband?”

Warm water muddled clear thinking. Sophie shook her head, trying to follow the clues. “Mike? What did-”

It was Moira who started laughing, hard enough to thoroughly jiggle the sleeping boy in her arms. He stretched in drowsy protest and curled back up into grandma magic.

Nell just grinned and took another bite from her sandwich.

Sophie felt her sense of humor kicking in. Obviously Mike hadn’t acted alone. “We were out-meddled by our husbands?”

“Yup.” Nell rolled her eyes. “Yours, mine, Elorie’s, and Nat’s. I don’t know what they did, exactly, but they’re very proud of themselves. And the Witches’ Lounge smells like steak.”

Moira’s laughter rolled one more time. “Well, tell them that my Marcus stood in the doorway of my kitchen, all brooding and wrapped in his winter cape, and did them all proud.”

Nell gaped. And then she spluttered. And then she started laughing so hard Sophie was afraid someone had let a tickle spell loose in the hot pool. “His… his… his *cape*?”

Moira and Sophie stared at each other, mystified-they were all well used to Marcus’s odd attire.

“The big black one?” Nell pealed off in gales of laughter again.

Sophie giggled-whatever was so funny, it was hopelessly contagious. “Share-please?”

“Aervyn.” Nell gulped for air, stray giggles leaking every which way. “My son just got back from a quick visit to Marcus’s house. He was making some sort of secret delivery for the men in our lives. That’s how I found out they had their hands in this.” She choked back one last squirt of laughter. “He was doing laundry. Marcus. In his skivvies. And his cape.”

It took a moment. A long, long moment. And then Sophie’s mind was indelibly inked with the image of Marcus, wearing only his underwear and wrapped in a huge black cape.

Standing in Moira’s kitchen, claiming Morgan as his.

Chapter 12

Moira sat in her garden, an old lady under a full spring moon.

And wondered why she couldn't go to sleep.

Then her garden changed to a favorite stretch of beach. Ah. Dreaming, then.

A rock glinted in the moonlight. She smiled and bent over to pick it up. An old witch could always find use for another pretty rock.

Strange. This one seemed so heavy. A tiny rock, holding tight to the planet. She patted it gently-who was she to argue with a pebble that wanted to stay put?

She stood back up, her legs feeling tired and old. Blessed Mother, did she even have to feel old in her dreams?

The strain in her legs eased considerably. Better.

Moira walked another step or two, and then turned back. Still, it glinted in the sand, the little rock with the soul of a tree. Intrigued now, she retraced her steps, the wet sand cool under her feet. And felt a heartbeat.

Quiet and long, but a heartbeat, nonetheless. The slow thrum of life, vibrating through Nova Scotia sand-from a small, moondusted rock.

Reverently, Moira sank down beside the pebble. "It's hard to cling to sand, wee thing that you are. You'll need to sink roots deep. The winds are fickle, and the waves not always gentle."

She listened to the magic of her heart now. With careful hands, she shaped a rooting spell, one for the hardy plants that lived in tough soils. The survivors. Reaching out, she spoke to the waters. *Nourish.*

The heartbeat strengthened.

She spoke to the life within the rock. *Trust.*

***

Marcus's eyes flew open moments before the monitoring alarms blared.

He'd felt her go.

With quaking hands, he shushed the spells and reached for Morgan's mind. She was still warm. Maybe he was in time.

He chased deep down her mental channels, calling. Screaming. *Morgan!*

Nothing.

Gone.

Mad with fear, he hurled himself against the edges of the mind that was his baby girl. *MORGAN!*

And felt the faintest trace of her.

With every ounce of power, he grabbed on. And held.

He was the most powerful mind witch in Fisher's Cove.

And this time, he would Not. Let. Go.

***

A healer learned to wake to alarms. And when she slept with a small baby at her side, she learned to do it very quietly.

Sophie slid out of bed, reaching for bag, shoes, and cloak in one smooth flow of movement. A sprint down the hallway and out the front door, and then a dead run to the end of the village, hitting the buttons on her phone app that would wake a much wider team-and wondering why the hell Marcus hadn't already done it.

She charged through his front door, dread spiking at the utter silence.

Monitoring alarms could wake the dead-that was their whole point.

Careening into the cottage's only bedroom, she finally found them. Marcus, sitting in the streaming moonlight, face marble-white-with his hands wrapped around Morgan's head.

A very cold Morgan. And the man clutching her head was using enough power to drain himself to nothing in minutes.

One hand on each forehead, Sophie tried to read the nightmare that was her conjoined patient. Morgan was very cold-but her vitals were still strong. Moving a hand, Sophie tickled her knees, her belly, her elbows. Reflexes still there. Level two travel-not gone.

Not gone.

But Marcus had wrapped some kind of insane mind bubble

around her head, one strong enough to kill him-or drag both of them into the astral plane.

She needed them separate. *Now.*

Sophie looked around the room, cursing the inadequacies of her healer bag. And spied what she needed. One quick step and she had the laptop in her hand. Two more, and she smashed the flat side into the side of his head, shielding the baby with her own body.

It wasn't pretty. But she felt the connection between man and baby snap, the loose end hitting Marcus's brain with the force of a bull whip. Pain ricocheted into her head, the price of a healing link still wide open.

Dropping the laptop, she reached out to help-and then read the fury on his face.

Oh, hell. Sophie yanked for magic, understanding the deadly race she was in. And she won. By a hairsbreadth. Her paralysis spell deflected a mind stun that would have knocked her out for a week.

Imbecile. And mad as he was, her spell had about thirty seconds to live. Sophie got straight to the point. "You listen to me, Marcus Buchanan, and you listen well. She's not gone. You hear me? She's *not gone.*"

His face contorted in a desperate effort to speak. "Had. Her. You. Broke."

God, she wasn't even going to get thirty seconds. "She's still moving, still present." She shook his shoulders, willing comprehension into his head. "She's not gone."

His arm jerked free of the spell's hold, a mad bear about to break loose-and then she saw it in his eyes. Sanity in the midst of madness. He understood.

The remnants of her spell evaporated, and he reached for Morgan's body, frantic. "I don't feel her."

His voice shredded her heart. She laid her hands over his. "Trust that I can."

Need help? Lauren's voice beamed in. *We have a whole slew of witches out here if you need us.*

Sophie debated. And made the hard call. *Not yet. But keep a watch.*

She placed her hands on the sides of his head, feeding a bolt of healing power into his reeling mind. "She's level two, Marcus. Tethered, but floating." Safe, so long as they got her home fairly soon.

But they couldn't start yet. Five thousand years of history had made the protocols for most emergent magics very clear. You didn't throw water on a fire witch. Earth witches needed to sleep outside when magic bloomed. And travelers had to be given the freedom to hit the end of the tether anchoring soul to body.

Calling them back any earlier was like trying to turn around a

toddler on their way to an ice cream cone. With a whisper.

Sophie scanned Morgan again. She'd never cared for a level-two traveler, but the lore was strong-and healers were trained to trust those who had come before.

Even when they were scared to their bones. Morgan felt so very far away.

"She's getting close now." Sophie eyed Marcus, trying to balance the needs of both her patients. He nodded, eyes still swimming in fear, and what she hoped was enough trust. She took both of his hands. "I can do this-or you can."

His entire body shuddered. *Not safe. I'll do it.*

She would weep for the terrified little boy later. "She's not in the mists, Marcus." Not tonight. The risks to either of them were minimal.

He shuddered again, and a bigger dose of sanity flowed back into his eyes. *I'll do it.*

He was a witch fully grown and he loved the small girl in his arms. She had to trust that it would be enough. "Remember-it's your job to stand. It's hers to come back." She stretched out as much love as she dared. "You can't do her part for her."

She reached for earth power, rooted as deep as she could pull, and offered it to him. He needed to feel her strength. *We'll be waiting. Call your girl home.*

***

He could go get her now.

Marcus felt like a soldier under fire, numbed to the death screaming over his head at regular intervals. The inside of his skull begged for mercy, channels ripped to shreds trying to hold Morgan close.

Idiot.

Astral Travel 101. Travelers can't be held. They can only be called.

And usually that failed too.

Cool waters lapped at his head. Healing waters. *She's not gone, Marcus.*

He let himself touch the coolness Sophie offered, for just a moment. He had to be ready.

It's time.

Marcus turned in the darkness of his mind. East. The direction Morgan had gone, just like every traveler before her.

And instead of purple eyes, he saw brown ones.

Anguished guilt blew through the cracking, scarred dike holding back memories of his twin brother. Evan, counting shiny rock treasures and offering up the biggest pile. Evan, bare feet racing up the sand, always a half step ahead.

Evan, headed east, laughing-and never coming home.

It's not Evan gone now. Sophie's mental voice shook him, hard. *We were too late with him. Morgan's still tethered, and she needs you.*

He felt her hands, pushing against the memories in his mind, trying to contain them.

He could have told her it was futile.

Brown eyes.

No.

Purple eyes. They needed him. With all that he had left, Marcus sent up a magical beacon-a light to call his girl home. And tried, somewhere, to find a whisper of hope that she was close enough to see.

***

Lauren felt Marcus slide deeper into sleep and nodded at Sophie. "He's under. Want me to put up a bubble?"

The healer pondered, and then shook her head. "That will block him off from Morgan, and he needs to feel her."

Lauren looked over at the happy, drooling baby lying on a blanket on the floor, Ginia and Lizzie filling dual shoes as playmates and monitors. "She seems fine." The motley crew standing outside the house had held their breath as Marcus's beacon finally flared-and deflated in a collective whoosh of relief, moments later, when a stream of magic had danced through their midst.

One traveler, back home-and nothing wrong with her that a bottle of warm milk hadn't fixed.

Jamie came over, two suspiciously green glasses in his hand. "I've sound barriered this corner of the room so we don't wake him up. Come drink your just rewards."

Even Sophie looked askance at the glasses. "Which of my students is responsible for those?"

Jamie's grin was not reassuring. Lauren decided she didn't want to know. "I don't need green goo. All I did was a little mindlinking. Cookies will fix me right up." It was probably bad that she sounded panicky-healers smelled fear.

Mike walked over, Adam asleep in his arms. “It goes down easier if you hold your nose.”

Right. Lauren scowled at Jamie. “I’m unvolunteering for any late-night duties that involve green goo.” She wasn’t at her best at whatever the hell time this was. Not enough coffee.

“I’m glad you were here.” Sophie sat down on the nearest chair, glass of gunk obediently in her hands. “Marcus is the only mind witch on this coast who talks through walls easily.”

The walls had been nothing compared to the effort needed to broadcast Sophie’s voice through Marcus’s hard head. “It seemed like you had things pretty much under control.”

“She did.” Jamie shook his head and looked at Mike. “Your wife has balls of steel.”

Mike spluttered in quiet laughter, Adam jiggling in his arms. “Yup. She broke his laptop. That took some serious courage.”

Jamie chuckled. “Forgot about that. I’ll put my repair crew on it-see if we can resurrect it from the dead before he wakes up and tries to choke someone with the remnants.”

Sophie just made faces and kept drinking.

Lauren eyed Jamie. Newbie-witch time again-there had been a lot of emotional baggage in the room, but Sophie had appeared to navigate it all with a deft touch. She was lost. “Why was she brave?”

He shrugged. “There were a dozen people standing in the street, any of whom could have put up a beacon for Morgan-and she sent in the guy with the drowned-cat magic instead.”

Marcus had been in pretty rough shape, but a beacon wasn’t complicated magic. Lauren frowned. “I haven’t had coffee. Not following.”

“She took a risk.” Mike’s voice was full of pride. “A big one, and it worked.”

That didn’t compute. Witches, especially healers, didn’t take unnecessary risks. She wasn’t *that* new.

Jamie grinned. *Says the woman who left a juvenile delinquent in charge of her office.*

Lauren rolled her eyes-Lizard wasn’t all that delinquent anymore.

Sophie smiled and set down an empty glass, looking several degrees perkier than when she’d started drinking. She glanced over at the man sound asleep on a couch in the corner, a tiny sock still clutched in his hand. “He needed to know he was there for her tonight. It will help him face what might be coming.”

Lauren felt unease hit all three minds closest to her. She’d had enough of a crash course in astral travel to understand why. Level two, the traveler was still tethered and fairly easy to call home. Level three required a full circle and someone willing to put their life into

the circle's hands while they chased the traveler-and even then, it often ended in tragedy.

Level three scared the crap out of every witch she knew.

Mike settled carefully in a chair beside his wife. "How deep did she go?"

Sophie's eyes held a bleakness Lauren had never seen. "Far enough. She was so faint, Mike-I could barely feel her. All the warning signs are there."

She was high risk for full-blown travel-and all they could do was watch and wait.

Mike leaned in to comfort his wife, and Lauren reached for one of the cookies that had suddenly appeared in Jamie's hands. She had a question. A very quiet one. *How was Evan missed?* Moira was the most conscientious witch she knew.

He was a fire witch. Jamie's mental sigh carried the same collective guilt that stamped every conversation about Evan. *Astral travelers always go through the safer levels first, as their magic develops. At first, they get cold-except fire witches never get cold, so no one ever noticed. Just a really bad combination of magics.*

An awful and sad one-and it explained one of the missing pieces. After cold came tethered travel. *And that weighs on Marcus too-that he didn't notice his brother leaving.*

Jamie's forehead pinched together in grief. *Five-year-old boys sleep like the dead. He couldn't have known.*

Lauren had learned something about the bonds between brothers who had shared the same womb. *He doesn't believe that.*

No. Jamie watched Morgan playing, cookie uneaten in his hand. *None of us would.*

Chapter 13

Jamie watched The Monk steal into another dark alleyway, and turned so the small girl riding on his back could see. “What do you think he’s up to, munchkin?”

“Ya-ma-da-da-ya.” Kenna chattered away happily, far more interested in the buckle on the backpack. So far, early attempts to teach her game strategy weren’t going very well, but at least it let Nat take a nap. Nights were not exactly restful lately.

The Monk turned, silhouetted for a moment by the mage-light in his hand.

Huh. Jamie moved closer, curious now. Odd bumps under cloaks were generally grounds for concern in Realm. He strained to catch a better angle-and then laughed as a small, naked foot popped out.

Marcus’s game persona turned and glared. “If you’re going to follow me, you could at least do it quietly.”

Not a totally unreasonable request. Jamie released a silence spellcube around the four of them-no way was he trying to keep Kenna quiet enough for good skulking. “What are we up to? Is that librarian kid on the move again?”

“I have no idea.” Marcus tucked the stray foot back under his cloak. “My house has been invaded by people expecting me to crack at any moment-I needed somewhere to go.”

Realm had always been a haven for introverts. Jamie’d never been one, but his brother Matt had sometimes suffered from the witch hordes. “You’ve got a nice private castle keep-how come you’re in the alleyways?”

Marcus looked around like he’d never seen an alley before. “I don’t know. We were just taking a walk. I need to think.”

Jamie winced and spelled away a basket of half-rotten grapes, Marcus’s foot inches from being slimed. And sighed-he knew the classic signs of parental sleep deprivation. The man needed a keeper. “Want another head to help you think?” He didn’t have to ask about the topic.

“I’ve spent forty-three years thinking.” Marcus stopped and leaned back against a wall covered in dirt of questionable ancestry. “Gotten exactly nowhere.”

Jamie pulled out a couple of apples and offered one up, crunching on the other. Two sleep-deprived guys were not the best brain trust to throw at hard problems, but there was something that had been niggling him. “Have you wondered why Evan sent Morgan to you in particular?”

Marcus blinked.

“Think about it.” Jamie tugged on the thread he’d been worrying. “If we assume he wasn’t just trying to torture you, then he must believe you can help keep her safe.”

“With what?” Marcus looked ready to spew rocks. “Light sabers and pretty blue flowers?”

“Dunno, dude.” Although Jamie was pretty fond of the light sabers idea. “That’s what you have to figure out.”

“My brother always did overestimate my thinking skills.” Marcus’s voice was as dry as dust, and no more hopeful-but Jamie could hear his brain coming online. “It was usually his utter disregard for the laws of physics that got us into trouble, and then he’d expect me to come up with some brilliant idea to get us out.”

It was an experience Jamie had lived through all too often-and the first time he’d ever heard Marcus volunteer anything about his long-gone brother. “Devin was the holy terror in our trio. Matt was the brains.”

Humor tickled the edges of Marcus’s mind. “What job did that leave you?”

“Lookout.” Jamie squeezed the feet of the chatty baby on his back. “Don’t let anyone tell you that’s the easy job, girl of mine. The lookout always gets in trouble first. Gramma Retha’s got eyes in the back of her head.” Although if Nell’s experience bore out, their mother was more often found aiding and abetting the troublemakers these days.

Apparently grandmothers played by different rules.

“The Fairy Godfathers missed that particular piece of advice.” Marcus flicked invisible lint off his robe. “The car-seat-on-top-of-the-dryer trick was quite useful, however.”

Jamie said nothing. He’d mostly been the lookout for that particular project, too.

“You might thank Daniel and his sidekicks, should you see them.” Marcus pushed off the wall and meandered in the direction of daylight. “And tell him to fix whatever infernal hole he used to hack my computer.”

It had been a very small hole-Daniel had cursed a blue streak

getting that particular job done. Jamie grinned. Maybe Marcus would read his damn email next time.

Kenna cooed as they reached the street, arms stretched up to the sun. His child of heat and light, even the virtual kind.

They watched as Slink walked by, followed by a couple of motley tagalongs. Fifteen years trying, and he was still the worst player in Realm.

And then Jamie had another piece of the puzzle. Sometimes they were easiest to see just as you stopped looking. “What does Slink do wrong?”

Marcus snorted. “What *doesn’t* he do wrong?”

Point, but not the one he was trying to make. “He has no plan. All he ever does is react to what happens in Realm. He never experiments, never builds alliances, never launches an attack.” He didn’t even pick his sidekicks-they just kind of stuck to him like old chewing gum.

Marcus stared. “You think I need to go attack the mists?”

Kind of. “I think you need to stop reacting. Go on the offensive. You’re one of Realm’s best strategists-you play to win.”

The Monk steered around a lamppost, amused. “Hasn’t worked out so well. I’m currently getting schooled by a ten-year-old.”

“Exactly.” Jamie’s instincts were humming. “And still you fight. That spellcube raid you led a couple of weeks back? Warrior Girl’s still steaming over that one.” And plotting revenge, but he was sworn to secrecy on that part. “Fifteen years, and you keep coming up with new ways to play. To win.”

“The game’s not life.” Marcus’s voice was quiet, but fierce. “Nobody dies here.”

Jamie pushed away the sympathy-it wasn’t what his friend needed now. “Not all that different. Does Morgan need Slink protecting her? Or does she need the mind that causes half of Realm to tremble?”

Marcus snorted. For form. But his brain had snapped into high gear. Jamie had reason to know that it was a pretty fearsome weapon-and maybe Evan had thought so too.

It had to beat skulking in alleyways.

Jamie watched as The Monk marched off down the street. The sleeping general had awakened. Not a bad morning’s work.

***

Moira touched her fingers to a last zinnia and climbed slowly to

her feet. She'd been tending flowers all morning, and a nice distraction was finally walking down the street.

She'd been waiting for hours.

Under the cover of the large, floppy hat that graced her head, she studied the meandering duo. Morgan looked right as rain, if a mite perplexed. Marcus looked like his usual scowly self, which was balm to her heart.

Sleep and green goo fixed many things.

Judging from the way Marcus was holding his wee girl, however, something quite different was needed at this moment. She stepped out of her flowers and walked to the gate. "Good day, nephew. 'Tis a diaper you'll be wanting, I'm thinking." She grinned at the brogue in her voice-little ones always brought out her Irish.

Marcus grunted in greeting. "If she'd just stop kicking her legs like that, we might make it to Elorie's without catastrophe."

That seemed fairly unlikely. Moira opened her gate. "Come on in-I'm sure I can scare up a spare nappy somewhere."

The look on her nephew's face was high comedy. "You have diapers?"

"Indeed I do." She snipped a sunny yellow buttercup on the way by-her table bouquet could use some brightening.

"And why is this the first I've heard of them?" Marcus's growl would have been more effective if he hadn't been fighting amusement at the antics of the child in his arms, waving frantically in the direction of the buttercup.

Moira reached over and snipped another. "One for you too, darling girl. You can take it home with you."

The drooly grin was lovely to see-but it was the light touch of humor in her nephew's eyes that had an old witch sniffling. She could count on one hand the times she'd seen him relax into simple pleasure.

She walked in her door and headed straight for the hall cupboard-baby poop didn't come with a lot of patience. It pleased her immensely when Marcus reached automatically for the diaper and looked around for a place to put his bright-eyed girl. "Come-I've a blanket on the spare bed for just this purpose."

Morgan grinned happily as Marcus set her down on the bed. Moira sat down beside her and held out the buttercup. "Maybe you've some earth witch in you, sweet girl. Or maybe you just like buttercups. They were your uncle Evan's favorite."

Marcus's hands froze, diaper halfway undone.

Moira kept talking to the baby, trusting the urgency of poop to do its job. "When he got a little bigger than you are, he used to rub them on his face and pretend to be the sun, all yellow and happy." She

touched the blossom to a pink cheek. “And then he’d have his brother make a storm cloud, and they’d walk around town pretending to be the local weather forecast.”

Sweet giggles shook Morgan down to her toes-and had the added benefit of getting the man in charge of her diaper moving again. Moira smiled, delighted with them both.

And then she crossed her fingers and took an enormous chance. “Do you remember that, nephew? The two of you, bringing water and sunshine to the gardens of the village? You nearly drowned Clare Higgin’s prize roses.”

Marcus snatched a baby wipe. “Someone taught me a rain spell and forgot to mention how to turn it off.”

Ah, yes. She’d forgotten about that little training lapse. “You figured it out quickly enough. And then we taught your brother a quick-dry spell.” Mischief was always fertile ground for new magic lessons.

“Scorched my shorts.”

The voice was gruff-but he was talking. About Evan. Moira blinked back tears and reached out a hand to the baby. “Tell her the stories, Marcus. She needs to know her history.”

Eyes snapped to hers in painful shock. “Evan’s not her history.”

“She’s a witch.” That ran deeper than blood. “And we need to remember the whole of Evan. Not just how it ended.”

All she got in response was the harsh sucking of breath.

No point just dipping your toe in the hot water. “Remembering frees us-even when it hurts in our very bones.” Pain sliced at her, old agonies thrust into the light of day. “And Morgan needs us free.”

“Why?” One word, ripped from his throat.

“Because you’ve lived a life of paralysis, my sweet, beautiful man-and we’ve let you.” She leaned over to kiss a round cheek. “This one, she needs us now. We can’t let ourselves sit still in fear and pain any longer.”

A long moment of silence-even Morgan lay still, watching them with big, wide eyes. And then Marcus’s hands moved again, sliding baby limbs into bright, stripey leggings. “You sound like Jamie. He gave me the more manly version of that same speech this morning.”

Had he, then? Moira hid a smile-young Jamie was becoming quite the skilled meddler, and an early riser, too. “Witches are never shy with advice. You know that.”

He snorted and scooped Morgan off the bed. “All too well.” He raised the baby up to eye level. “It’s a bunch of nosy busybodies you’ve chosen, silly wiggle.”

Morgan made a noise that sounded suspiciously like agreement.

***

Marcus tucked down into a cluster of boulders at the far end of the main beach of Fisher's Cove. If he remembered correctly from his wayward youth, this was the best spot to avoid being seen. It was a matter of survival-village rumor said Lizzie was experimenting with her green goo again.

And he still needed to think.

Carefully, he tucked another blanket around Morgan. Boulder clusters weren't the warmest of places to take a small baby.

She promptly kicked the blanket off, naked toes waving in the rather brisk breeze coming off the ocean.

He snorted and covered her up again. "Listen, girl-child. The faster you get cold, the sooner we have to head back for hearth and home."

Morgan grinned-and stuck her toes out the bottom of the blanket.

It was like trying to wrap an octopus. He raised his eyebrows and stuffed the wandering limbs back in. "I'll tell Lizzie you're the one that requires a dose of green goo."

The feet quieted, lavender eyes considering his words with great seriousness.

Heh. "Smart girl." Marcus nodded in satisfaction. The Fairy Godfathers had been certain you couldn't negotiate with babies. Perhaps, despite the manual's general usefulness, they didn't know absolutely everything.

And then Morgan let loose with the telltale sounds of poop detonation. Accompanied by giggles.

"Again? Ingrate child." He refused to laugh, even as her Houdini feet escaped the blanket one more time. With a sigh, he raised an air bubble around the two of them. Magic on the beach probably wouldn't escape notice, but he could hardly strip her down in a brisk Nova Scotia breeze.

She'd been cold enough lately.

Good mood suddenly gone, he squeezed her feet, reassuring himself of their warmth and general feistiness. He needed to figure out how to keep them that way.

Just for a year. Witchlings with the telltale signs of astral magic grew out of it, or developed mature powers. You just had to keep them alive long enough for it to happen.

One year. Twelve months. A million breaths.

A long, gray eternity.

Morgan's fussing interrupted his thoughts. Bloody hell. Marcus reached for changing supplies. Maybe he could just mark the time

against poopy diapers. His brain refused to do the math. Anything involving poop and several zeros was far too frightening to contemplate.

And Jamie was right. One breath at a time might work in yoga class, but it was the fastest way to annihilation in Realm. Smart players had strategies and fallbacks and several layers of attack moving at the same time.

He snagged one of Morgan's feet right before it created poop catastrophe. Who was he kidding-he couldn't even plan a diaper change without incident. "Hold still, creature, or we'll have to give you two baths in one day."

With fast hands, he got the new diaper on and the old one sealed away in three Ziploc bags and a containment spell. And then reached down for the little girl babbling happily in their dungeon between the rocks. He held her up to his nose, caught, as always, by the humor in her eyes. "What am I going to do with you?"

She hiccupped, and a giggle spilled out.

He held her steady and waited-maybe she'd do it again. Lavender eyes stared at him solemnly, feet waving quietly in the wind.

"That one was an accident, was it?" He had the sudden, bizarre urge to see if there were more hiding inside her somewhere. Carefully, he nuzzled his nose into her belly and blew.

What came out sounded far more like whale farts than the raspberries Lizzie had blown. Morgan looked at him in wide-eyed surprise. Unwilling to be outdone by a six-year-old, Marcus tried again-and got a grin.

Getting closer.

One more time, Marcus blew against her belly-and this time, the stars aligned. Giggles ignited in Morgan's toes, a great shaking mess of them.

Marcus held her out at arm's length and felt something similar rising from his own toes. Life, it seemed, was contagious. He pulled her in close and blew one last time.

They were right. It was time to act.

Even if he had no idea what to do.

***

Sophie watched as Lizzie dropped the last handful of chamomile in her brew. Her trainee looked up. "That should work. Do you think it needs anything else?"

Sophie leaned over and sniffed the contents of the huge pot on the stove, trying not to wince. It smelled atrocious. “What do you think?” Part of the job of a healer was to know when to quit-and Lizzie’s concoctions still suffered badly from overkill.

“Maybe some mint to make it smell better.”

Even mint wasn’t going to chase off the odor of year-old gym socks, but it was a laudable thought. “If you made this again, how could you prevent the stinkiness?”

Lizzie’s head cocked to the side. Sophie turned off the stove-no point burning smelly gym socks while her student was lost in thought. Mike had high tolerance for most healer shenanigans, but he had a sensitive nose.

One more stir and Lizzie grinned. “I could let them sniff some of Gran’s skunk remedy first, and then nobody would notice how this one smelled.”

Sophie tried not to laugh-Aunt Moira’s skunk remedy was urban legend, but a very effective one. Nothing got patients to drink something foul more quickly than threatening them with the one that was worse. “That’s one approach, cutie, but we modern witches sometimes try to do things more subtly.”

Her student headed for the cookie jar. “Why?”

“Well, in the old days, healer brews were usually the only choice if you wanted to feel better. These days, people have more options.” Doctors and pharmacies and little pills that sometimes worked miracles and sometimes masked the real problems. “The old ways need to adapt.”

Lizzie looked at her sideways. “Gran doesn’t think that.”

Oops. Sticky territory. “She believes in balance, and in respecting the old ways. That’s important, and it’s a good place for every witchling to start.”

“I know, I know. Feet firmly planted in the traditions.” Lizzie rolled her eyes and looked down at her bare toes. “I think they like running better, though.”

Sophie grinned at the broad hint. “Okay, lesson’s over. Go play on the beach, or whatever it is that has you all antsy.”

“I get to go play with Morgan.” Lizzie started stuffing herb jars back onto the shelf in a six-year-old version of clean-up.

Ah. Her student had fallen in particular love with the village’s newest resident. “Is Marcus still trying to make you change all the diapers?”

“Nope.” A lid slammed down on the pot. “He’s getting pretty good at all that stuff.”

That was fascinating-and odd. Rumors of Marcus’s sudden competence had been circulating for two days, but no one had any

idea how it had happened.

Lizzie tilted her head again. “Is he Morgan’s daddy now?”

Sophie wondered briefly why the hardest questions always came at the end of lessons. “He’s taking care of her, so he does a lot of the same things daddies do.”

Lizzie frowned. “That just makes him a babysitter.”

“Well, he’s also her guardian. You remember the woman who came to visit us? She put Marcus in charge of making sure Morgan is safe and happy.”

“He doesn’t hate that so much anymore.” Small fingers touched a droopy flower, perking it up. “He likes Morgan a lot now, even if he still growls sometimes.”

Being a parent was a journey, and none of them were entirely clear just yet where Marcus stood. “That’s good. It’s a lot easier to take care of a baby if you love them.” She tugged on a stray pigtail. “If you weren’t all so cute, we’d feed you to the fishes.” It was a threat oft repeated in Fisher’s Cove.

“Morgan’s way too cute to feed to the fishes.” Lizzie giggled. “They can have Sean, though.”

The first person who tried to dump Sean into the briny deep would instantly face the wrath of their smallest water witch, but Sophie kept that knowledge to herself.

“I think Marcus will love Morgan soon.” Lizzie picked up her backpack. “She still makes him sad a lot, though.”

Sophie reached over to hug the bright and far-too-aware girl who had adopted Morgan as her baby sister. And hoped fiercely that there weren’t oceans of sadness yet to come.

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Marcus looked up and growled. Quiet invaders were no less welcome than their noisy counterparts, and Lizzie had left only minutes ago. Receding footsteps suggested his point had been made. Morgan was finally sleeping, and he was supposed to be coming up with some grand master plan to keep her safe.

So far, he had exactly nothing.

The scuffling sounds returned outside his doorway. Interloper, or intrepid mouse-either way, he wanted them gone.

Instead, he found Kevin, adding another pile of dusty books to a very precarious pile. Marcus grabbed the newest ones before the entire enterprise came crashing to the ground and woke up his purple-

eyed master. “What are all these-you running away from home?”

Kevin’s smile was tentative-an unusual sight these days. Growls had ceased to scare him some time ago. “I heard you were trying to figure out how to help Morgan.”

Yes. A project he intended to keep children well away from. Realm’s gossip chain rivaled the one in Fisher’s Cove. “I don’t need your help, youngling. Or your dusty books.”

“Gran says all the knowledge of the world can be found in books.”

Gran hadn’t learned about the Google. “Some questions don’t have answers.”

Brown eyes gleamed, undeterred. “No-but there are still clues.” He took a deep breath. “Astral travel is an old power, so I started reading the old books.”

Gods. The history of travelers was full of death and misery. “This isn’t work for children.” It broke grown men.

“I’m a witch.” Said quietly, in a tone reminiscent of Moira at her least biddable. “And I know how to find things in books.”

“We don’t know how to save them, Kevin.” Marcus willed a modicum of kindness into his voice-the boy was just trying to help. “We’ve never known.” One of the oldest of magics, and one of the least understood.

“I know.” Sadness shadowed the boy’s mind. “I didn’t realize there were so many.”

Marcus did. He’d learned every last one of their names as a child, looking for some clue, some way to find Evan and bring him back. “Put away the books-there’s nothing to find.” He ran a hand through the boy’s hair. “I was a reader once.”

Kevin pulled out a sheaf of paper from his backpack. “I made a list. All the travelers I could find, and where they lived, and what happened to them.” He took a deep breath. “I think I found something.”

There were pages of notes. All written in careful childish hand, mute evidence of many hours spent deciphering cryptic old texts. Days of work, started long before anyone else had even begun to think straight.

It wasn’t in Marcus to send him away unheard. He would listen-and then perhaps the boy could be convinced to master the fine art of diaper changing instead of spending useless hours in the bowels of witch history. “What did you find?”

“It’s easier to see this way.” Kevin reached into his backpack one more time, and then started unfolding the rattiest map Marcus had ever seen. “South America fell off while I was working, but you don’t really need that to see the pattern.”

South America wasn't the only continent in serious jeopardy. And several countries in Africa hadn't been called by those names for fifty years. "Where'd you find this?"

"Joey's grandma's attic." Kevin's eyes gleamed with treasure found. "No one else wanted it, so she said it was okay if I took it home."

Joey's grandma's attic had been feeding small-boy fantasies since before Marcus was born-he was fairly certain she planted a new crop of treasures up there every spring.

"Do you see the pattern?" Kevin stood calm, but his mind was practically zinging.

Marcus stopped trying to decipher African countries and attempted to pay enough attention to reward Kevin's efforts. There were little brown X's scrawled all over the map. "What are all the markings?"

Kevin nodded in approval-apparently the question was on the right track. "Those are where travelers lived. Every time I found a town, I marked it on the map." He frowned. "The records aren't very good-I couldn't find a location for everyone."

No doubt. Not to mention that cities had changed a fair amount over the last several hundred years. Marcus tried to focus. There was a fair collection of X's in the east. "Lots on the coast here."

Kevin hovered, trying not to explode. "Where else?"

Marcus looked. "Ireland." Not exactly a surprise-half of recorded witch history happened on that small green island.

"Where else?"

Marcus reached a finger out slowly and touched a quiet brown X on the coast of Nova Scotia. Evan.

"Sorry." Kevin looked down at his shoes. "I wanted to include all the data. It's what good researchers do."

There was a reason he'd been born to crusty bachelorhood. He hurt feelings just by breathing. "What did you find, witchling?" Marcus cursed the gruffness in his voice-and had no bloody idea what to replace it with.

"All the travelers…" Kevin's voice was barely audible now. "They all lived near water."

Water. Mists. Marcus's eyes sped over the bedraggled map. All the X's. All within a stone's throw of the ocean. Most witches lived near water, but not all. He felt the pattern of the X's coalesce into certainty in his brain.

Astral power only worked near the water.

One more time, Marcus touched the lonely X on coast of Nova Scotia.

"Will it help?"

Kevin's glasses sat askew on his nose. Gently, Marcus reached out to straighten them. And blessed the boy who had found him something to work with.

He had a clue. A thread. A place to start.

And *now*, by the gods, they would have a plan.

Chapter 14

Chaos in Realm wasn't all that unusual. But as Jamie surveyed his domain from a convenient hilltop, it was clear this wasn't the usual kind of bedlam.

Marcus was remodeling-and he'd recruited half of the coders in Realm to do it, including most of those who were usually trying to depose him as the number-three player in the land.

And he was revamping part of Moira's Meadow.

Which required serious chutzpah-and admin-level access. Jamie squinted as a familiar figure walked into the meadow. Or a world-class hacker. Damn. After ten years of invisibility, Daniel was suddenly haunting Realm again. And while Nell's husband had admin access, it amused him not to use it.

Time to get a closer look. Jamie ported down to the field where chaos currently reigned-and nearly tripped over Warrior Girl, setting some kind of multi-layer warding spell in place. Which would have been really nice coding if his leg weren't halfway through the spell.

Ginia giggled. "Don't move, Uncle Jamie, and I'll have you untangled in a jiffy."

That would be good. Glitter had ruined two sets of armor already this week-hanging out with Warrior Girl was a dangerous occupation. "What the heck's going on?"

She grinned. "Uncle Marcus is building a nursery."

A *what*? Jamie scanned the field. "A nursery needs a moat?"

"That was Aervyn's idea." Ginia unwove spell threads as she talked. "Uncle Marcus vetoed the alligators, though. Too many teeth."

Aervyn was loose in Realm? That couldn't possibly end well.

Jamie tried to remember he was in charge-that's what he told investors all the time. "Who gave him admin access?"

"Mia. Or maybe Shay. Somebody did." His niece cheerfully dismissed a major security breach. "Marcus says we can make one of the rooms pink and glittery from head to toe if we want."

Bribed by glitter. He needed to have a serious discussion with his

child labor, but first he needed to chat with the rogue player who was running this show.

Getting there was tricky. He encountered a singing Moira, planting neat beds of blue flowers. Mia and Shay, installing a lagoon that looked suspiciously like the one he'd just coded for his private Realm retreat. Daniel and Kevin, directing a geek brick-laying crew. And Sophie, muttering something dire at the rocks underfoot.

By the time he got to the guy in charge, Jamie was pretty sure he was the most poorly informed witch on either coast. "Ahoy the captain. What's going on here?"

Marcus shrugged. "It was either this or move to Kansas. This seemed easier."

"Kansas?" Jamie had sudden visions of tornadoes. The last time one of those had shown up in Realm, it had spread purple poop over four kingdoms. "Why?"

"Far away from the water." Marcus pointed a delivery of rocks in the direction of one of the castle walls. "Where have all the travelers lived?"

He was failing witch Twenty Questions. "Not in Kansas?"

Marcus's eyes sparked with victory. "Exactly. Kevin figured it out-they all live near water. The mists. Water must be some kind of conduit for whatever power makes astral travel possible."

Jamie blinked. It made an eerie kind of sense. "So you're taking Morgan away from water?" Virtual reality was about as far away from water as you could get-of the real kind, anyhow.

"Only at night." Marcus tossed an incantation cube in the direction of a pile of rocks and hummed in approval as they helpfully rearranged themselves into a tower. "We'll spend the days in Fisher's Cove and sleep here."

And most of the citizens of Realm were blowing all their game points to help him do just that. Jamie was catching on fast, but his head was having trouble wrapping around a few of the salient details. "And you need a castle for this?"

Marcus rolled his eyes, alight with humor. "I asked for assistance. It was perhaps a mistake. The crew is rather zealous."

They certainly were. But it was the first part of what he'd said that had Jamie's attention. Marcus's high mountain keep was the fanciest private zone in Realm. And instead of retreating there, he'd brought Morgan to the very heart of Realm's communal strength-and asked for help. That wasn't the act of a crusty old bachelor witch.

It was the act of a father.

One whose girl-child was about to have the fanciest castle in Realm. Jamie turned, surveying the hive of activity. "How can I help?"

Humor fled, and in its place came the battle-worn general. “Help Ginia with the wards. I need the best protection spellcoding can buy.”

Well, you didn’t kick a guy into action and then rain on his first big idea, even if it was re-landscaping half your virtual world. Jamie saluted, and looked around for Warrior Girl. He had a couple of ideas for that layering spell.

And then Kevin pushed a wheelbarrow full of bricks by, and Jamie knew he had one thing do to first. He looked back over at Marcus. *Have you thanked Kevin?*

The general was back to throwing incantation spells at walls. *What?*

Jamie resisted the urge to bonk him over the head with a mental two-by-four. Clearly, plenty of crusty-old-bachelor brain was still alive and kicking. *He’s a kid about to explode with pride that he brought something important to the table. Try something new. Thank him.*

Marcus looked at Kevin’s retreating back and scowled. *And what magic tells you this?*

Not magic, replied Jamie wryly. *Experience. I was kid brother to a magical menace a fair amount like Sean.*

His companion snorted. “You didn’t have a fraction of Kevin’s common sense.”

Probably true. “I had more than Devin, though.” Most days.

“Doubtful.” But Marcus was looking at Kevin with new eyes. “Living in the shadows, is he?”

It occurred to Jamie, far too late, that there had been another wild brother once. One with a forty-three-year-long shadow.

***

Building towers was exhausting, even if you had fairly unlimited magic at your disposal.

Marcus walked a quiet hillside overlooking Realm, a transport cube in his pocket. Morgan was asleep in her new castle, and there was a bevy of tired coders eating in the main hall.

He’d needed peace more than food-and real warriors didn’t eat pizza.

A wisp of long-forgotten memory tickled his mind. Evan, disgruntled in his Superman cloak and very wet pants, insisting that warriors didn’t eat turnips. Or maybe they’d been pirates that day-the cape and wet pants weren’t much of a clue.

Mom had laughed-and made them eat the turnips anyhow. Five-

year-old warrior pirates just didn't have that much pull in Fisher's Cove, no matter how big and fierce they thought themselves.

Evan would have loved the many battles of Realm. Hell-he'd have been leading most of the charges.

Marcus stopped, the twisting in his gut all too familiar. There was a reason he left those memories buried in the sludge of time. It did him no good to remember.

Scaredy witch.

Evan's favorite taunt. Marcus scowled as the words floated up in his head. *I'm not five anymore.* And any old memories that thought he might be could just go back into the moldy boxes of his brain. He had a very adult problem to solve, and thoughts of pirates and turnips were hardly going to help.

Turnips still suck.

Great. Now the moldy boxes were trying to have a conversation. *Turnips are good for you.* As were any number of other vegetables that most witches turned up their noses at. *Magic can't be powered on cookies alone.*

You sound like Mom.

Yes, he did. And that was a sad commentary on the inner workings of his mind. *How about we get off the topic of turnips, hmm?* If he had to have a conversation with himself, there had to be a whole universe of more interesting topics.

Kissed a girl yet?

Marcus stopped dead, fist ready to punch his brother in the nose-before he remembered he was forty-three years too late. Hecate's hells, what had been in the healer goo? His head had enough to do without imaginary figments of Evan.

Kissing's fun.

Marcus snorted. *The last thing you kissed was a dead fish.* On a dare-one that had somehow managed to include both of them. The genius idea of Mary Margaret Higgins, age seven. *You killed my dating life forever.*

It seemed wrong that his own head thought that hysterically funny.

You didn't stick around long enough to end up being the teenage boy who once kissed a fish. Mary Margaret's memory had been very long.

She's waking up.

That made no sense-until the transport spellcube in his pocket activated.

Morgan was awake. And it was long past time to leave memories of turnips and fish-faced girls well enough alone.

***

Nell climbed into the hot pool and smiled at its three occupants. “I’m getting really used to this.” Hopping on a transport spell and beaming across the continent had become an everyday occurrence.

And one she treasured, especially when there was a hot soak and good company at the other end.

Sophie slid over and patted a rock. “We sent all the witchlings to the beach with chocolate cake and told them not to come back for at least an hour.”

Nell smiled at Elorie, lounging in relaxed bliss over in the corner. “Got five minutes away from your babies, did you?” Moms of multiples didn’t get very many of those.

“They’re napping in Realm.” Elorie opened one eye. “All the babies are. Five of them, lined up in little bassinets.”

That was news, and a miracle of fairly major proportions. “Kenna too?”

“Even Adam fell asleep.” Sophie shook her head, laughing softly. “Whatever Marcus did, I hope he can repeat it.”

Marcus Buchanan, baby whisperer. It was entirely possible the end of the world was near. “I hear he made a really big mess of Realm.” With her trio of daughters as his happy minions.

“He did. I wanted to help.” Elorie sounded halfway to nap land herself. “But it was mostly coding they were doing.”

Coding wasn’t Elorie’s forte. She had the much rarer skill of effectively herding witches. “You’ve harnessed the forces of Net magic-Marcus only tapped into what you’ve already created.” Nell grinned and reached for a sandwich. “He lacks your organizational skills, however.”

“So I heard.” The corners of Elorie’s mouth turned up. “I sent Aaron to supervise the kitchen. Apparently Marcus’s castle staff isn’t used to company.”

Sophie chuckled quietly. “I believe it was Mia and Shay who coded his new staff. Their attire was rather… purple.”

That much she’d heard. Jamie had checked in while cheerfully de-spelling the new moats of alligators and fire-breathing dragons-her youngest son had gotten a tad overenthusiastic.

The real reason for Jamie’s call, however, had been to report on the part that had Realm abuzz-Marcus had been seen smiling. More than once. “Sounds like everyone was more than happy to help.” Ever since the creation of Moira’s Meadow, Realm had been far more than a game-much to the delight of its player legions.

“It was a very nice bit of magic,” said Moira, moving slowly

around the pool refilling tea cups. “Morgan has a delightful castle now, and Ginia did a beautiful job with the warding, mixing new magics and old.”

That was an interesting tidbit-Moira was the protector guardian of ancient warding spells. Jamie had also passed on a visual of the new castle gardens-resplendent in cornflowers, lavender, and a host of other things Nell hadn’t recognized. She was pretty sure the choices weren’t accidental. “I hear you directed the planting crew.”

“Not exactly.” Sophie snorted. “She threw us all out and got down on her hands and knees.” She eyed the older woman with interest. “I had no idea you had that many game points stashed away.”

“Mmm.” Moira set down the teapot and sat on a comfortable rock ledge. “I’ve been doing some trading with the new arrivals.”

Nell grinned-she and Jamie had been watching their oldest player’s strategy with interest. New arrivals to the witch-only levels generally had game points to burn-and little or no magic stash. “You’ve been very generous.” In Realm, Moira had strong magic, and she dispensed it with the open heart and canny mind she showed in real life. A few more months for the new players to build strength, and their loyalty to the sweet old lady was going to be a real force to be reckoned with.

The old lady in question chuckled and sipped her tea. “Someone has to keep that daughter of yours on her toes.”

“You’re doing that. I ran amuck of one of your Irish blessing spells the other day.” Sophie rolled her eyes. “It took half an hour and most of my spellcube stash to get out.”

“Well, then.” Moira sniffed primly, but her eyes twinkled. “Clearly you were somewhere you weren’t meant to be. Irish blessings read your heart and behave accordingly.”

Nell hadn’t taken that close a look at the spells Moira had been peddling. Irish blessings were almost all ancient warding spells-and the old magics had some tricky layers. “You’ve figured out how to Net magic a blessing?”

“Aye.” Moira’s eyes were serious now. “It started as a wee idea for the game, but I’m glad of it now. Ginia wove some of them into the barriers around Morgan’s castle. She’s a talented spell weaver, your girl. Takes after her mama.”

Nell blinked. “Ginia’s a spellcaster?”

“Not in the classic sense.” Sophie shook her head and smiled over at Elorie, who had quietly fallen asleep, her head pillowed on a convenient rock. “But just like you weave elemental powers together to cast, Ginia’s got a nice hand with threading Net magic into much older spells.”

She’d missed an awful lot driving Nathan to baseball camp. “It

sounds like Morgan is well protected."

"As well as the best magic and programming in Realm can make her," said Sophie, quietly fanning her hands through the water. "And word's gone out to keep any suspected travelers far away from water."

Nell suspected it was the quietly snoring Elorie who had taken care of that little detail. She frowned, unsure if it was mind power or mama intuition-but another detail was tickling the back of her skull. She frowned, trying to tease out the mental feather. Something about Ginia and spellweaving… "Why use the old magics for the Realm warding? Wouldn't those be the trickiest to weave with Net power?" Magics had affinities-and old and new seemed like they would be an unstable fit.

"Traveling is old magic." Moira watched the light fog rising from the water's surface. "The very oldest, if what we remember from the mists of time is true."

Now the feather tickled more strongly. "So we need the old wards to keep away the old magic?"

"I believe so." Old eyes hazed. "I've been having dreams. Sparkly rocks and moondust. Signs of ancient portent."

Sophie frowned. "You scattered shiny pebbles in Morgan's garden. Sean brought a whole collection of them."

"I did." Moira held her teacup close. "They belonged there-my bones knew."

Nell felt an odd shiver move through her. The wise and difficult magic of the crone always made her feel weird. Mama intuition on steroids.

And the rock thing was a little strange, given her second mission of the afternoon. "I hope Sean didn't take all of them-Jamie wants some for Aervyn's training."

Moira chuckled softly, her eyes back to their normal cheery twinkle. "They aren't always portents-witches have a simple affection for shiny things, too. I believe our beach can spare a few more."

Nell leaned back into the warm waters. She'd get on that-right after her muscles melted a little more.

***

Marcus looked down in disgust. "Lost another one, did you?" Pretty soon all of Fisher's Cove was going to be carpeted in Morgan's lost socks. Even Moira's hand-knit booties didn't stand a chance-his girl was a sock Houdini.

His girl.

Gods. She flattened him. All it took was a smile, one of her patented trucker burps, or a missing sock.

And she carried a talent with a survival rate worse than your average childhood cancer.

Marcus looked around at the bright, happy flowers and the neat, weathered cottages they decorated, and tried to fight off the terror that stalked him every minute of every day.

An odd sound floated up from his chest region.

Marcus looked down. Pure innocence looked back up at him. And then she grinned, took a deep breath, and blew a raspberry.

Something suspiciously like girly giggles bubbled up in his throat. “Learned a new trick, have you? Bet you can’t do it again.”

Oh, she could. Marcus walked the length of Fisher’s Cove, spellbound, watching wiggly lips blowing one raspberry after the other, interspersed with drooly grins.

“You keep looking down like that, both of you are going to wind up in the ocean.”

Marcus rolled his eyes. Once upon a time, the remote location of Fisher’s Cove had actually prevented tourist witches from dropping by for tea.

Nell fell in beside him and smiled at the baby’s tricks. “She’s young to be doing that-don’t think any of mine mastered it for another couple of months yet.”

Marcus felt a strange sense of pride. “Perhaps she had a better teacher.”

Morgan blew a particularly noisy raspberry and Nell laughed. “I don’t think she agrees with you.”

He ran his finger down Morgan’s nose, just another one of those little things he’d been unable to prevent himself from doing lately.

“Lots of drooling,” said Nell, tickling the toes Morgan insisted on hanging out of every carrier. “Is she getting teeth?”

Teeth? “I have no earthly idea.” And no clue how to check. The Fairy Godfather Manual had made no mention of teeth.

“Just stick a clean finger in her mouth at some point and feel her gums.” Nell bent over to pick up something glittery on the side of the road. “It’s the ones in the front that come in first.”

Why was it that every time he thought he was getting the hang of this baby business, some new wrinkle showed up? “Sounds like a good way to lose a finger.”

Nell laughed. “Just be glad you aren’t nursing.”

Ye gods and little fishes. Marcus wished desperately for brain bleach to erase the images that sprang unbidden into his head. He’d learned about diapers and burping and how to make it through the

day without using up his entire shirt collection. But he refused to traumatize his bachelor brain with considerations of baby milk in any form.

A man had to have his standards.

And dammit, now both his companions were clearly laughing at him. He turned down the path to the beach, somewhat annoyed when Nell stayed casually at his side. “Don’t you have things to do?”

“Yup.” She held out her hand, several shiny pebbles on her palm. “Jamie wants sparkly rocks for his next training session with Aervyn. I promised to collect some.”

Sadly, the beach tended to run to an excellent supply of pebbles. “There are no rocks in California?”

“When you get bigger,” Nell addressed herself to the happy girl in his arms, “perhaps you can teach your guardian here some social skills.”

The insult, he ignored. It was the “when you get bigger” part that sent pangs through Marcus’s heart. The fear lurked so damn close, every hour of every day.

“Sorry.” Nell spoke softly, voice full of empathy. “I know how hard it is.”

No one could know. And then Marcus realized, grudgingly, that of all the witches, on all the beaches, she might be the one who did. Mama to the mightiest witch in generations. “How do you live with it?” He hated the tremor in his voice-but for Morgan, he would ask.

“One day at a time.” Nell gazed out at the dancing waves. “And when that’s too much, one smile, or one minute, or one cookie at a time.” She reached down for a handful of sand, letting it run through her fingers. “Or in the words of my husband, ‘choose life unafraid.’”

“It hurts.” Marcus blanched, horrified those two words were his.

“Yup.” Nell picked up another shiny pebble. “And the more in love you fall, the more you let their sweetness tuck into all the dark, hidden corners of your heart, the more it hurts.”

He sighed. “She burps like a trucker.”

Nell’s chuckle rolled out over the water. “The reasons we fall in love never make sense.” She looked over, quiet for a moment. “You have to love a lot to do this.”

Naked honesty. Not what he’d expected. He looked down at his raspberry-blowing girl. “I thought you’d feed me some line about joy and happiness and finding the shiny, sparkly moments.”

“I will.” Nell’s smile held sadness-and challenge. “When you’re ready.”

He watched Morgan’s naked toes play with the wind. And thought that perhaps he might be closer than she thought.

Chapter 15

Marcus contemplated the long, skinny box in his hands. The contents were no mystery. And given the village grapevine, the fact that the UPS truck had pulled up in front of his cottage was likely to have Lizzie on his doorstep before the tea kettle whistled.

He looked over at Morgan, lying on a floor blanket doing her best imitation of a flipped-over crab. “You ready for sword-fighting lessons, baby girl?”

Happily flailing arms suggested it might be a long process. Marcus watched her bat at random bits of air above her head. Moira said babies played with the faeries. Dust motes, more likely-the cottage came complete with plenty of those. Housekeeping was a bit more of a challenge when you only had one arm available most of the day. And so far, he’d managed to resist offers from neighbors wielding mops and brooms-he had enough invaders as it was.

Running footsteps outside warned that the next one was about to arrive. Marcus pulled the door open. It wasn’t hospitality-the last time Lizzie had bolted through his door, she’d nearly given him a concussion.

“They’re here, they’re here!” She bounced off the walls like a dizzy human tornado.

He wondered briefly if a helmet might have been a good idea as well. “Slow down, girl-child. Swords come with rules. Let’s review them, shall we?”

She stopped, hands on hips and disgust plain on her face. “You never make Sean and Kevin do the rules.”

“That’s because boys’ ears aren’t attached to their brains.” Marcus tapped on the box. “First rule-swords are for outside only.”

Lizzie crossed her arms and glared. “Outside, no whacking, no leaving them on the floor for someone to trip on, and don’t poke anybody’s eye out.”

That seemed like a fairly complete list. “Well then, let’s unpack them and find the instructions, shall we?”

“Instructions?” Lizzie looked like he was speaking Mandarin Chinese. “They’re light sabers, Uncle Marcus. You hold them in your hands and fight.”

Marcus reached for a pair of scissors. “Ah, but these ones have sound effects.”

He was pretty sure Lizzie could make a career out of eye rolling. “*You* read the ’structions. I’ll just use my girl brains to figure that stuff out.”

He winced, pretty sure he was losing control of the conversation yet again. If Lizzie used a sword half as well as she used words, Sean and Kevin were in deep trouble.

When he opened the box, he expected the high-pitched squeal from the child bouncing beside him. What he didn’t expect was the pang of little-boy desire in his own heart. Even in plastic wrap, the sabers were… awesome.

Damn *Star Wars* propaganda.

And to hell with the instructions. With hands far too reverent for his own comfort, he lifted one of the sabers out of the box. And felt the handle accidentally slip into his hands. “En garde, evil invader!”

The witchling under attack looked at the sword tip three inches from the end of her nose and giggled. “That’s *not* outside, Uncle Marcus. And it’s pretty close to poking out my eye. Do you know how to use that thing?”

That kind of challenge to his manhood really couldn’t be tolerated. Marcus swiftly unwrapped both sabers and handed one over, hilt first. “To the back yard, miscreant!”

“I don’t know what a ’creant is.” Lizzie clutched her sword with maniacal glee. “But I won’t attack until you move Morgan.”

The baby. Hecate’s hells. Marcus looked around for a place to stash his saber-and decided baby slings were missing some key accessories. And it was lightly raining outside, which wouldn’t bother a Fisher’s Cove child in the slightest, but it probably meant you weren’t supposed to lie a baby on the ground.

The saber in his hand itched for freedom. And if Lizzie didn’t hit sword-friendly territory in the next five seconds, she was going to explode or break something.

Time for a change of plans. “To Realm, rabble rouser!”

Lizzie’s eyes got large. “To the castle? Can we fight on the drawbridge?”

As long as Jamie had done a thorough job cleaning up the fire-breathing dragons. “Possibly. I’ll need to find someone to watch over Morgan.” Sadly, the cat wasn’t an adequate babysitter.

His pint-sized fighter’s eyes gleamed with something deeper than mischief. “I’m pretty sure Sean and Kevin could do that job.”

He heard what she didn't say loud and clear. She'd been relegated to some second-class role one too many times while swords clashed. And as he reached down for the purple-eyed girl lying on the floor, some part of Marcus was suddenly very eager to see that change. "Perhaps you can go ask Aunt Moira if she'd like to come watch Morgan for a bit." He winked at Lizzie. "Tell her we'll put a rocking chair out on the ramparts so they can watch."

An excited sword narrowly missed his nose. "I'm going to feed you to the alligators, 'creant!"

Hopefully Jamie had taken care of those as well. "I fear that you just might, young warrior. So I propose a fight of a different kind."

Lizzie's eyes narrowed. "What kind of different?"

Suspicious child. He pulled the sling tight around Morgan's back and picked up his saber, voice as casual as he could make it. "I was thinking we might challenge Sean and Kevin to a duel."

For several seconds, all Lizzie could do was stand and stare. And then she turned and ran, feet pelting his front walkway, six-year-old voice paging the twins at the top of her lungs.

Her mind beamed a single, blazing column of fierce, battle-ready joy.

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Moira settled into her rocking chair with a view, enjoying the nice breeze on her face and the readying battle below. She reached over to check on the sleepy Morgan, tucked into a replica of Great Gran's foot cradle. "Rest your eyes a bit, sweet girl, while our Lizzie trounces those boys."

The outcome of the battle was in little doubt. Lizzie had waited six years for this moment, and she could outthink Sean three times over. Kevin wasn't quite so easy to outmaneuver, but he had a soft spot for Lizzie that would likely keep his enthusiasm for defeating her in check.

And Lizzie had a secret weapon, although she wasn't aware of it yet.

Moira watched as the dueling forces staked out their turf. The rules had been decided, the moats cleared of a couple of stray alligators, and a rather sizable audience assembled. And one small healer, on the cusp of her first battle, was bouncing so hard she was going to end up wet before a single blow was meted out.

It was Marcus who did Moira most proud, however. He stood

about six feet behind saber-waving Lizzie, dressed in black, glowering, and generally frightening the populace while doing very little. A soldier supporting his general.

A quick whifting sound warned Moira of incoming company. Aervyn grinned, waved, and took off running for the drawbridge, leaving a trail of bubbles in his wake.

Nell unfolded a chair and sat down, chuckling. “He was having a bubble bath when the news arrived. I don’t think he did the world’s best job of rinsing himself off.”

Moira watched him wave an imaginary sword through the air. “Looks like he’ll be joining the battle.”

“Nope.” Nell shook her head. “This is Lizzie’s show. He’s going to help Jamie with the new armor spells.”

Now that was interesting. “Tweaked them, has he?” Realm had a series of carefully coded spells that players coated themselves with before battle. They allowed for wild and unruly fighting with little risk of harm, and very accurate scorekeeping.

“He might be talked into letting you beta test.” Nell grinned. “In case a sword fight or two is in those mysterious plans of yours.”

Moira grinned. They just might be-an old witch needed to be crafty to move up the Realm ranks. She turned back to the drawbridge, eye caught by a stir in the crowd. “Oh, good. My little gift has arrived.”

Nell scooted her chair closer to the edge of the ramparts. “What are you up to?”

“Just a wee leveling of the playing field.”

“A legal one?” Her companion chuckled. “Or am I going to have to report you?”

“Entirely legal.” Game rules stipulated very clearly that no magical assistance could be offered to the duelers. Which was full of all kinds of loopholes, if you were clever witch.

Warrior Girl, dressed in full battle regalia, walked toward Lizzie. The drawbridge was silent, all eyes on the solemn-high approach. Ginia stopped, her words amplified by a thoughtful spellcube. “Lizzie Donegal, I bring you three gifts, in the tradition of women warriors everywhere.”

Moira grinned-that part had been her idea.

Lizzie’s eyes were as big as plates.

I take it this is your idea? Moira jumped at her nephew’s wry mindvoice. She didn’t bother to reply-he’d know the answer soon enough. And a little pomp and circumstance never hurt anyone.

Ginia pulled the first item out of a resplendent purple velvet sack. “To strengthen your feet, my very first pair of shiny purple boots.”

Nell laughed in quiet surprise, eyes glued to the activity down

below. “I haven’t seen those in two years.”

“Aye.” Little feet grew out of even the most treasured footwear. “But when they fit her, she never took them off.” Moira remembered tucking Ginia into bed, shiny boots and all, the birthday eve they’d arrived.

Ten-year-old fingers laced Lizzie’s feet into the boots, their audience waiting patiently. Moments of import couldn’t be rushed.

A moment later, Ginia stood again and pulled out a second bag, much smaller this time. “For courage and strength, an armband hammered with a mighty stone of agate.” She slid a wide silver band, clearly Elorie and Sophie’s work, around Lizzie’s non-sword arm.

Nell chuckled again. “Somebody studied Realm’s rule book very carefully.”

Indeed. They’d checked with Kevin-there was no rule against objects born from magic. “The true power of that armband is the love that made it.”

“Mmm. Pretty soon we’re going to need a lawyer witch around here.” The edges of Nell’s eyes crinkled. “It’s a great idea-I’m glad someone thought of it.”

Ginia reached for one last bag, hanging from her waist. “For wisdom and long life, and generosity in victory, this simple hair clip.”

Lizzie leaned forward, her nose almost in Ginia’s hands. Moira knew what she saw-a small and nondescript bit of metal, tarnished by time and age-old use.

“What on earth is that?” asked Nell quietly.

“Just a wee hair clip.” Ah, an old witch could still confound the best of them. She watched in satisfaction as mystified whispers spread in the waiting crowd.

Ginia pinned it in Lizzie’s hair. “Worn by a woman known only as Aife.”

Moira grinned. Ginia had delivered the line exactly as instructed. Now they’d see who’d really been paying attention in witch history lessons.

It pleased her mightily when Nell was quick to laugh beside her. “Family heirloom, is it? That explains a lot.”

One of her most precious, even if the legend wasn’t true.

Nell leaned over a little further. “Look. Kevin’s eyes just doubled in size. I think you’ve given Lizzie the advantage you intended.”

Kevin whispered in his twin’s ear-and then two sets of eyes stared at Lizzie with significantly more respect.

A puzzled six-year-old stared back, and then turned to the man in black behind her. “Who was Aife, Uncle Marcus?”

“She was Irish.” He paused a beat. “The greatest Irish sorceress and warrior who ever lived.”

Moira waited as several thousand years of Irish mythology came to rest on the simple pin in Lizzie's hair. And watched in pride as her youngest student turned back to her foes-eyes fierce and hand on her sword.

Sean and Kevin were in a wee mite of trouble.

***

Sophie tried hard not to grin as Lizzie turned, a warrior ready-with shiny purple boots, Darth Vader sword, and the pin of an ancient Celtic druidess in her hair.

Battle referees were supposed to be impartial.

Do witches even know the meaning of that word? Marcus spoke inside her head, his face showing no signs of his clear amusement. *She's going to cream them.*

Given the way Lizzie was waving her sword around, that was entirely possible, especially if Sean and Kevin didn't stop gaping long enough to actually defend themselves.

Give them a moment, said Marcus dryly. *They've just been ganged up on by half the womenfolk of witchdom.*

It's boots and a little jewelry. Sophie was well aware he was right, but there was something entirely unnatural about agreeing with Marcus. *We're just making sure Realm's newest female warrior gets a little respect.*

And given his silent stance as the metaphorical holder of her cloak, they weren't the only ones. Which was just plain weird.

Sophie surveyed her battle participants-this was an awfully long time for Sean to stand still. "Everyone ready?"

It took a second, but when Sean picked up his sword, the gleam of pirates flashed in his eyes. Not entirely easy pickings. "Ready!" Kevin stood at his shoulder, silent and watchful, saber at half mast.

If Lizzie was smart, she'd be a lot more worried about Kevin.

"Fight fair!" Sophie raised the rainbow flag of Realm. "And-GO!"

Lizzie's mad charge toward Sean's belly wasn't a huge shock. Marcus hot on her heels, sword at the ready, was.

Surprised pirate tangled with warrior priestess, magic singing off their armor spells. Sophie winced. Someone should have added reinforcing spells to the swords.

Do you think I'm a complete fool? Marcus sounded like he was having a cup of tea mid-battlefield, his feet dancing gracefully out of Kevin's way. *Lizzie would never forgive me if her saber broke.*

That was amazingly insightful thinking from the man who had taken two years to realize she might even want one.

Sophie focused on Marcus again. Sword calm, quiet, and deadly. Or it could have been, if he weren't carefully schooling Kevin in some arcane form of dance.

Pfft. It's called fencing. A long and illustrious sport that a goodly number of the denizens of Realm would do well to study. Marcus rolled his sword under Kevin's, stopping just short of disarming him. *I captained my college team.*

Kevin blinked-and settled his saber back in his hands, much quieter this time.

Sophie watched as their bookworm witchling mirrored Marcus's footsteps, learning the strange and ancient dance of swords. And grinned as Kevin's sudden lunge nearly sent Marcus into the moat.

Hmmph. Marcus sounded disgusted, mostly with himself. *He's got some potential, this one. And I'm a lot older than I used to be.*

Lizzie yelled something unintelligible and fierce as she dove under Marcus's sword hand, aiming for Sean's knees. Sean spun in frustration, still tangled in his own cape-

And froze.

Ear-piercing klaxons blared through Realm, loud enough to wake the dead.

Morgan.

Sophie bolted for the ramparts and realized Marcus was four steps ahead of her, long legs flying over rough cobblestone. She slowed down-a healer with a concussion wasn't going to help anyone-and then remembered she was in Realm. Two quick finger taps later, she'd ported both herself and Marcus to Morgan's side.

The wailing Morgan's side.

Marcus swung a hand around, flinging power at invisible enemies. He grabbed Morgan roughly-a move that did nothing to diminish her howling-and screamed commands at the tablet on his waist. Voice-activated spells flung in all directions. Warding. Seeking. Hunting the terror that stalked his baby girl.

Sophie had seen ravaging mama grizzlies that looked less fierce.

And none of it was necessary. The kicking, screaming, pink, warm Morgan was very much present.

It was Moira who silenced the alarms.

And Moira who reached out to touch Marcus's hand as Morgan's cries finally penetrated.

The edges of insanity leaked out of his eyes, and he looked down at his baby girl. Really looked, his hands gentling as he touched her cheeks. Her toes. Caught her waving hand and squeezed it, soothing her cries down to nothing.

And when he finally spoke, to his tiny audience of one, it was a decent approximation of Marcus Buchanan. “We might have won without the interruption, you know.”

Lizzie giggled. “Maybe she’s mad you were using her sword.”

He looked up, eyes taking in the concern on the assembled faces. And for the first time that Sophie could ever remember, walked toward a crowd. Carrying the baby girl they all wanted to see.

***

Nell was one of the few not watching Marcus.

She was watching her brother and her healer daughter, standing nose to nose over one of the funky new Realm tablets. She edged carefully through the crowd. *What’s up?*

Dunno yet. Jamie’s mental voice sounded distracted. *We’re still trying to figure out which warding spell got activated.*

Two more blonde heads reached him before Nell managed to squeeze through the last of the witch bystanders. Good. Mia was a hotshot hacker, and Shay was their most surefooted debugger.

Best ten-year-old online security team on the planet.

And it made her proud that they were looking for the breach while most people were just happy to see Morgan safe.

“There.” Ginia stabbed a finger at a corner of her tablet. “That’s the trigger.”

Jamie grunted and moved his nose in closer. “What spell is that?”

“One of the old ones.” Mia’s fingers moved at light speed, scrolling lines of code. “Ginnie, you’ve got it labeled as ‘shiny rocks’?” She looked up, puzzled. “What’s that mean?”

“It’s the one Moira asked for.” Ginia frowned. “It’s a really old ‘stay put’ blessing. Kind of like a stasis field, but way older. It reacts if anything tries to touch all the shiny rocks she put in Morgan’s garden.”

Nell blinked. She was at least ten pages of code behind on this one. “What rocks?”

“She had us move in boatloads of shiny beach pebbles.” Jamie nodded in the direction of the moats and gardens below. “See how it glints down there?”

“Wait.” Nell was still trying to catch up. “So something magical tried to touch the rocks and set off a warding spell?” She frowned. In a game world full of witches, that could mean any number of things.

False alarm, maybe? sent Jamie quietly.

Perhaps. Or an errant game spell-the old magics weren't used to virtual shenanigans. *Whatever it was, it wasn't headed at Morgan.* At least not directly.

Hmmm.

Nell could feel Jamie's head ratcheting down from red alert. Her daughters were a different story.

"Here!" Mia stabbed at lines of code, her sisters hanging over her shoulders. "And whatever it was tried twice."

"Didn't make it through. Won't next time, either." Ginia's voice had Nell glancing up in surprise.

Jamie frowned over his niece's head. S*he's taking this really personally. I helped with the wards, but they're mostly her work.*

Nell nodded slowly. Message heard, loud and clear. She was insanely proud of her girls, especially of their instincts to love and protect and nourish the people around them. But whether or not today had been a real threat, Morgan was a traveler-the odds on her reaching her first birthday were terrifyingly low. And guilt could cripple even really healthy, happy girls.

Time to take some weight off ten-year-old shoulders.

Nell leaned in, a hand on Ginia's arm. "Moira says you're doing some weaving that looks a little like spellcasting. Want to show me what you've done?"

She read welcome in her daughter's mind.

And relief.

Chapter 16

Jamie walked into the Witches' Lounge, Kenna in one arm, a bag of guy food in the other. He grinned at the assembled guys and babies. The Fairy Godfathers, reunited. "Who called the meeting?"

"I did," said a dry voice from behind him.

Daniel came over to grab the bag of food and waved at Morgan, riding kangaroo-style in Marcus's pouch. "Traced back my hack, did you? It was a fairly sloppy one."

"Wasn't necessary." Marcus's lips quirked. "I don't know all that many men capable of creating a baby dressing flow chart."

Mike grinned at Jamie-that one had been their little contribution.

Aaron looked up, his daughter a tiny, curled puddle on his chest. "How'd the bath thing go?"

Marcus snorted. "She's clean. Let's just leave it at that."

Yeah. Kenna's short life had been full of a lot of overly exciting moments, but by far the worst had been the first time Jamie had tried to give her a bath. He had no freaking clue how fathers without teleporting skills managed it.

Mike sniffed at the air. "Anything good in that bag? Starving."

"Sorry." Aaron shifted slightly, freeing up an arm. "Steaks require more than ten minutes of warning."

Doritos didn't. "You'll just have to clog your arteries along with the rest of us this time." Jamie tossed over a bag, wincing as it almost dinged Aislin in the head. His porting reflexes were toast after the sword fight. Keeping Lizzie out of the moat had been a full-time job, and Aervyn had been too busy waving his arms at imaginary dragons to be much help.

Aaron contemplated the bag. "Whoever designed these things was clearly not a father."

Jamie laughed as he tried to keep Kenna's hands out of the second bag. "It doesn't get any easier." He remembered one very sad night on the couch watching baseball, newborn Kenna asleep in one arm, his other fondling an unopenable beer and bag of chips.

Mike reached over and amiably ripped open Aaron's chips, helping himself to a large handful in the process. "These are banned from the house right now. Something about orange breast milk not being good for babies."

Jamie refrained from mentioning how many Doritos Nell had eaten while pregnant. None of her babies had been born orange. However, the rules for nursing moms were mystical, obscure, and absolute. And quite often made up on the spot by an exhausted, hungry mama.

Any man with half a brain learned to dispense love, sympathy, and food, not necessarily in that order. And to eat his Doritos in secret.

"If you all have your helping of orange poison now-" Marcus put Morgan down on the floor beside Kenna and looked around the room. "I need more help."

Jamie ignored the Dorito slander-Marcus had always been a strange witch.

Daniel reached over and tickled Morgan's belly. "She looks happy, nothing smells, and the diaper's not on backwards. Looks like you have it under control."

"Not with that." Marcus shook his head. "It's the traveling. I need a brain trust."

Jamie raised an eyebrow. "You have a pretty big one." Realm had closed ranks around their grumpiest player. Even now, half the level-seven players were trying to work out exactly what had set off the alarms.

"I know." Quiet gratitude leaked out of Marcus's head, along with a heaping dose of frustration. "But all we've done so far is fancy Band-Aids." He looked down at Morgan, busy watching Kenna trying to roll over. "It's going to take more than that."

"She didn't travel at all this time, right?" Daniel leaned back, eyes pensive. "Realm made a difference. Or the wards did."

Maybe both. "We're working on that." Jamie tapped his tablet, checking on his sister's progress reports. They'd ruled out false alarms and game shenanigans. "Nell's adding some more layers to what Ginia already had in place."

"She didn't travel." Marcus's words were terse, and somehow ominous. "But whatever came for her came in broad daylight."

Oh, shit. Jamie froze, fingers snapping back to his tablet. Astral travel happened at night. Always. He messaged Nell, and then looked up, facing the fear lurking in Marcus's eyes. "Maybe Realm made it easier. Changed the rules somehow." Night and day in Realm were very ephemeral things, decided by a few lines of code.

"Maybe it's time to try Kansas instead of Realm," said Daniel

quietly.

"I don't know." Marcus shrugged, and every father in the room felt his helpless anger. "I can't ward her half as well in Kansas. And I don't know if Realm has anything to do with this. Maybe it's Morgan who's different." He swallowed audibly. "Or the magic that sent her here."

Daniel nodded slowly, a master strategist weighing the odds. "Then fight from turf you know."

"Trying." Marcus's face was a picture of impatient frustration. He squatted down beside his girl on the floor and reached for her hands, voice suddenly hoarse. "But I still think there's something I'm supposed to figure out, and I have no earthly idea what it is." His plea for help pounded into every mind in the room.

Jamie watched, empathy in overdrive, as the little girl with purple eyes wrapped her fingers around those of the man who loved her.

And then Morgan burped like a linebacker, and mirth hit the room like a ton of bricks.

Mike eyed Marcus, chuckling. "You teach her that?"

"Hardly." The voice was crusty old bachelor to the core-but his eyes held an odd mix of embarrassment and pride.

Daniel leaned over and picked up his niece. "How about you, Kenna girl? Got any football burps in you? Or trucker farts?" He smiled, tossing her in the air. "Your cousin Nathan used to fart like a jet airplane."

Kenna giggled and babbled, no farts in sight. Jamie sighed-it wasn't for lack of trying. He looked over at Marcus. "They're never too young to start farting lessons."

"I'll suggest it to Aunt Moira." The delivery was deadpan, which only got Mike and Aaron laughing harder.

Jamie grinned-Moira had high tolerance for most little-boy stunts, but she'd always drawn the line at farting contests of any kind. He got down on the floor and tickled Morgan's toes. "You want lessons, munchkin, you just come find me."

She kicked her feet and puckered up. Jamie watched, fascinated, as she wiggled her lips, silently, intent on some not-quite-there trick. "What's she trying to do?"

The embarrassed pride in Marcus's mind spiked to entirely new levels. "Just something Lizzie showed her."

Morgan tried again, and managed some odd spluttery sounds.

And then Marcus, studiously ignoring everyone in the room, leaned over and blew a raspberry into her toes.

Morgan laughed in belly-shaking delight-and blew one right back at him.

It was ninety shades of adorable-and if embarrassment could kill, Marcus was right on the brink.

Jamie looked over at Daniel. Someone needed to rescue the poor guy.

Mike intercepted the look and dove into the Doritos. Loudly. “So, what’s next?”

Daniel shrugged. “We think. Backtrack. Put our brains to work.”

Marcus nodded. “That would be appreciated.”

Daniel grinned and tossed Kenna in the air again. “But in the meantime, I think we need to build a better baby carrier.”

Jamie stopped, his hand halfway into the Doritos. “You think we can ward a sling?” It wasn’t a bad idea.

“No.” Daniel rolled his eyes. “I think we can build a *smarter* sling.” He grabbed Marcus’s pouch. “This thing was built with a woman in mind. Those of us who don’t have built-in milk machines have different needs.”

Marcus’s mind fled into a haze of embarrassment. Jamie tried not to laugh-this meeting had been hard enough on a certain grumpy guy’s ego already.

Daniel held up the pouch again. “Where’s the bottle holder? The permanently attached set of car keys?” He winked at Marcus. “Some place to hang a sword?”

Aaron grinned. “A padded chest.”

Marcus growled.

Jamie visualized a baby sling with breast implants and pushed the image out to the room. Sometimes, you just had to let your inner thirteen-year-old boy out to play.

Daniel snickered. “You’ve been hanging out with Nathan too much again.”

Permanent immaturity was hardly his oldest nephew’s fault. “You don’t think they’d be useful?” Jamie seriously coveted Nat’s chest on a regular basis, and for entirely different reasons than he used to-Kenna slept way better with a little padding under her head.

“I know where we can get some.” Aaron reached for the Doritos, eyes brimming with barely restrained humor. “I hear there’s a new shop in Halifax.”

Marcus slammed his soda down on the table with far more force than necessary. “And then perhaps we can get back to the topic of making sure my little girl stays safe?”

“We’re already there.” Daniel looked over, eyes calm, a world of sympathy in his mind. “Sometimes the easiest way to solve a problem isn’t a straight line.”

“You think adding a sword sheath and breasts to Morgan’s sling is going to fight off the mists?” The grumpy factor hadn’t dialed down a

whole lot.

"No." Daniel leaned back. Jamie could hear the gears of his mighty brain searching for words. "When you code, you start at one end and work to the other." He waved his hand in the general direction of Realm's playing fields. "Most programmers do. Follow a line of logic."

"Sure." Marcus looked as confused as Jamie felt.

"Hackers don't." Daniel shrugged. "We don't get that luxury. We have to swim around, poke our noses in odd places, trawl for anomalies, connect strange dots."

"I'll take your word for that." Marcus's voice was dry as dust.

Jamie grinned. His brother-in-law had made peace with his gray-market skills long ago-but Marcus wasn't a total stranger to those realms either. Entirely straight-laced coders didn't have firewalls on their personal computers that made Daniel curse.

Hmph. Marcus sounded amused. *Gave him some trouble, did I?*

Daniel rescued his iPhone from Kenna's quick hands. "My point is, it's not always about brute force. You've thrown what you know at this thing. Brains, code, common sense."

Jamie rolled his eyes. "Half the stash of game points in Realm."

Daniel grinned. "That's a good thing. Maybe a few lazy witches will start to practice their coding skills again."

It was a fifteen-year-old argument. Jamie snorted like he was supposed to. "I hear someone's giving the new kids lessons." Between Daniel and Moira, Witch Level One had never been quite so… competent.

"Mmm." Hackers knew when to duck. Daniel looked over at Marcus. "Take a break. Help build a better baby sling, or plant flowers, or buy yourself some new shirts. Wait for strange dots to connect. Stop trying to force it."

Marcus stared. His brain churned. And then he looked down, a sudden spurt of humor breaking through. "What's wrong with my shirts?"

Jamie snickered. Quietly. The Fairy Godfather Manual had missed a few things.

***

Marcus sat down at his computer. The girl-child had just puked on his last clean T-shirt-and black was a hell of a stupid color for taking care of babies.

If a baby was going to reside in the Buchanan household, he needed an entirely different wardrobe. It was only practical.

He typed in the URL for the website Aaron had recommended-and blinked in horrified shock. There were men in the world who wore flaming pink stripes?

Gingerly, he clicked on a category. Men's shirts. Surely there were choices that were neither pink nor striped. Maybe a nice gray. Or blue. Or some sort of oatmeal color.

Gods. He was not wearing a shirt the color of baby puke.

And if he squinted a lot, you could hardly see the stripes on most of the shirts.

It had to be done. If you couldn't solve the big problems, incinerate the little ones.

The last time he'd run out of shirts, Morgan had drooled all over his chest hairs. And then slept on the soggy mess all night long. Wincing in memory, Marcus added anything to the shopping cart that didn't make his eyes bleed. Ten. That should be enough-at least a three-day supply. With overnight shipping, or he was going to be doing midnight laundry again.

And then he clicked back to the home page and bought the one with the pink stripes. Aaron had a birthday coming up.

***

Sophie walked into Aunt Moira's kitchen, curious. "You're sure Nell wanted to meet us here?"

"Aye." Moira looked over, a twinkle in her eye. "Something about the menfolk having taken over the Witches' Lounge again."

Mike had disappeared with a few incoherent mumbles. Sophie patted her son's well-padded bottom. "Maybe that's where your daddy's gone off to."

"Yup." Nell landed with a pfft of magic and the whiff of cookies. "Daniel, Aaron, Mike, Jamie, and Marcus. The dad collective."

Sophie let the word "dad" slide over her image of Marcus. It was a strange and uncomfortable fit-but not an entirely impossible one.

"I'm not sure my nephew is quite ready to admit to fatherhood yet." Moira handed out tea cups, Irish hospitality on automatic pilot. "But it pleases me that the others have gathered round him."

"They've done more than that," said Nell, eyes twinkling. She pulled a sheaf of papers out from under the cookies. "I've been doing some work on Morgan's wards. Tracing odd energy lines, cleaning up

sloppy code."

The kind of work that separated the truly professional programmers from your average gamer. Sophie grinned, very glad to be in the latter category. Mopping up code was about as much fun as any other activity requiring a bucket and soap. "You found something?"

"You might say." Nell sat down and grabbed a cookie.

"Ah." Moira's eyes twinkled as she slid into her chair. "You've a tale to tell, do you?"

"Mmm." Nell chewed, a storyteller well aware her audience was hooked. "Ginia and Jamie have footprints all over the wards, but there were other hands in the mix as well. Daniel, tightening up some code. Marcus taking a look."

"Good." Moira broke a cookie in two. "He's a careful witch, and a smart one. He'll want to see what others are doing for his girl."

Sophie took the offered half. Sharing was oxygen to witch blood, even when a heaping plate of cookies sat a finger's length away.

"I ran some queries, followed footprints." Nell stirred honey into her tea. "Kept an eye on Daniel in particular, because he's good at finding vulnerabilities."

Good at making them, too-he was a guy you wanted on your side. Sophie frowned. Something was up, but Nell's tone was too light for it to be a problem. "Was Daniel up to something?"

"Testing his unauthorized entry skills." Nell grinned. "He hacked into Marcus's computer. Used his Realm account to do it."

Moira's forehead furrowed. "Whatever for?"

"To play delivery boy." Nell handed out parts of her paper stack. "This is what they sent him."

Sophie looked down at the top page. *The Complete Manual of Babies. Brought to you by the Fairy Godfathers.*

Moira's giggles snuck out first, little bubbles of tea-laced laughter. "They wrote him a wee baby instruction book?"

Sophie was still stuck on the "Fairy Godfathers." Mike's fingerprints were all over that-he had a love of all things Marlon Brando. "I'm a bit scared to read the advice."

Nell chuckled. "It's less Mafia than it sounds. Pretty funny, though."

Moira started reading first-and melted into little-girl giggles. "Oh, my."

Sophie turned the page. *Executive Summary-read the rest when all poop is contained and neither you nor the baby are screaming. 1. Babies love movement-cars, slings, sword fights. Stop moving at your own risk. 2. You will mess up. Babies do not break. Try again.* She looked up, laughing. "I could have used one of these." The first few days with

Adam had been less than relaxing.

Nell snickered. “Keep reading-you might change your mind.”

Sophie scanned further down the page. *13. Poop is evil. And it smells. Don’t let anyone tell you differently. 14. A wet baby is as slippery as a greased pig. Never, ever get the baby wet in an area larger than a dinner plate unless they’re strapped in. And even then, proceed with caution.* Oh, dear. She stopped reading, weak with laughter. “Mike’s a trooper, but Adam’s first bath was a bit unfortunate.”

“The three keys to poop containment.” Moira read out loud now, wiping her eyes. “Instant action, a HazMat suit, and duct tape.”

“Pretty sure that one’s Jamie-Kenna’s the queen of poop explosions.” Nell pointed at her page. “Here’s my husband’s contribution. ‘Burp cloths are useless for baby puke. Get a catcher’s mitt.” She grinned. “He didn’t figure that trick out until Aervyn, though.”

Sophie kept reading, curious now. Number seventeen saddened her. *Sometimes babies are cranky for no apparent reason.* That would be Mike again, passing on the hard-earned wisdom of their first weeks with Adam.

And number eighteen made her smile. *Holding them close is never wrong, even if your arms are ready to fall off.* She looked up, swirling with love for the men who had ridden to Morgan’s rescue.

Nell’s grin echoed the same sense of dopey love. “There’s a flow chart for how to get a baby dressed. And recipes safe enough to cook while sleep deprived.”

Sophie started to flip-those might come in handy, especially if they were Aaron’s doing.

“It’s lovely.” Moira’s voice held the lilt of her childhood. “And they accomplished with Marcus what we couldn’t.”

“Got something through that thick head of his?” Nell grinned. “Definitely something of a miracle.”

“Aye, it would be.” Moira’s eyes gleamed in the muted light. “But what they did was far more difficult.”

She looked down, touching the pages with reverence. “They got something into his heart.”

***

Marcus looked up at the sound of footsteps in his living room. “Go away-busy!” He listened as the footsteps retreated, and looked over at the small girl sitting in her bouncy chair on top of the dryer.

“How come they always come when we’re doing laundry, hmm?”

She wiggled in naked happiness-all her clothes were currently in the spin cycle.

Pretty much all of his, too.

He leaned over and blew a raspberry into her wiggly belly, only mildly embarrassed by his weakness. And grinned when she blew one in return. “Show off. Bet you can’t do that again.”

She could. It had become their little routine.

He blew another one into the air along with some light wind magic, trying to keep her amused as he untangled another of her infernal onesies. The washing machine seemed to take special pleasure at tying them in knots.

She batted her hands at the imaginary raspberry-blowing monster fluffing her hair. “Easily amused today, are you?” It was a good thing-neither of them was dressed for a beach walk.

She wiggled her lips at him again. He shook his head, chuckling-the raspberries that missed were oddly endearing.

Aervyn popped into existence at his elbow. “Found you!” He surveyed Marcus’s cape, eyes lighting up. “Yay-are we playing superheroes again?”

Damn-he’d forgotten that some house invaders didn’t require footsteps to move around. And he’d be caught dead in one of Aunt Moira’s flowery pink dresses before he ran through the streets of Fisher’s Cove in his cape and boxer shorts again. “No time to play today, superboy.” He looked down at hope deflated. “Lizzie’s probably running around somewhere looking for trouble.”

“She’s a girl.” Aervyn frowned, his mind one big pout. “I don’t want to play with any more girls today.” He stomped two very annoyed feet. “I want to stay right here with you and be grumpy.”

Uh, oh. Marcus didn’t feel equipped to handle girl trouble. “We’re not having very much fun here, I’m afraid. The Buchanan household is in dire need of clean clothes, and no faeries have shown up to help us out.”

“You don’t need faeries.” Aervyn’s eyes brightened again. “I can help. I’m getting pretty good at laundry. I can fold and everything.”

Marcus sighed. He was an embarrassment to witch recluses everywhere-even the threat of stinky laundry didn’t chase off visitors anymore. “Surely there’s some other way you’d like to spend your afternoon.”

“No.” The answer was simple and accompanied with a heart-melting grin. “I like being with you. Can I stay?”

Even curmudgeon defenses could be breached. Marcus pointed at a pile of towels and rubbed the head of the small boy with the dark-haired version of his brother’s face. “See if you can turn those into

something resembling a folded pile."

Aervyn surveyed towel mountain, momentarily subdued. And then turned, a disturbing glint in his eye. "Can I use magic?"

There was no folding spell worth the energy-Marcus had tried. "Some things are better done the old-fashioned way, my boy."

"Nuh, uh." His self-appointed helper activated something that looked suspiciously like fire power. "I helped Elsie make this spell for keeping Nat's towels warm so that all the yoga people can have a happy moment." He smiled, the perfect picture of summer innocence. "I can make you happy towels, too. I bet Morgan would like hers all cozy and warm."

Marcus, lost somewhere back at "yoga people," tried to catch up. "You built a permanent warming spell?"

"Sort of." Aervyn wrinkled his nose. "It lasts a bunch of weeks, but the towels get wet, and it makes the spell go wonky after a while."

Water was anathema to fire spells-if the boy could make one last more than a single wetting, it was an impressive bit of magic. "How do you stop the power leaching?"

"I use Mama's air-weaving-loop trick." Aervyn looked up from his studious efforts to transform a navy-blue towel into the Creature from the Black Lagoon. "Fire will do that too, if you talk to it nicely."

Aervyn had fire-talking skills no one else on the planet could duplicate, but another detail tickled Marcus's memory. "Wait, you said you helped Elsie do this spell?" Witch Central's newest trapeze flyer wasn't a particularly strong fire witch.

"Mmm, hmmm." Aervyn poked at a piece of his towel sculpture that apparently wasn't conforming to expectations. "We practiced really hard. She can't do as many loops, so it wears off faster, but that's okay. She said she likes going back to visit Nat and make the towels warm again."

Marcus couldn't shake the ridiculous feeling that this might be one of Daniel's strange dots. "Can you show me how it works?"

"'Kay." Aervyn patted his monster in satisfaction and reached for another towel. "It's easier before you fold the towel. The loops don't get so tangly that way."

Given superboy's idea of "folded," that wasn't hard to imagine. Marcus closed his eyes, following the quickly dancing power lines of a spell in progress. It did look very much like Nell's woven-air spell-and he remembered all too well how much it had irked his fourteen-year-old self when tiny Nell Sullivan had created it. Six-year-old spellcasters weren't supposed to devise tricks that took a month of hard and very secret work to replicate.

Replicating her son's work wasn't an option-Marcus wasn't a fire witch.

But it was a heck of a spell, and Morgan would hopefully appreciate her nice, warm towels. Marcus reached out a hand to touch. Heck, *he'd* be darned appreciative-the cottage's one bathroom ran to the fairly rustic. "Very nice-can you do a few more?" Babies used up towels at an astonishing rate.

Aervyn grinned and waved his fingers in the direction of towel mountain.

Marcus didn't bother to ask. He was quite sure he was now the proud owner of a very large supply of self-heating towels.

That kind of magic deserved a reward. "Come on upstairs, my friend. I'm pretty sure someone has filled my cookie jar." He was capable of filling it himself, but a man with a small baby didn't turn down a steady supply of anything with calories.

Aervyn grinned-and vanished. Marcus looked over at Morgan and rolled his eyes. "I guess he'll be getting the first cookie." He reached to free her from her bouncy chair-

And felt the strange dots connect.

He took the stairs two at a time. Cookies would have to wait-he needed one more spell first.

Chapter 17

She would boil him in Moira's cauldron and teleport his bones to China.

Nell landed in the middle of Main Street, Fisher's Cove, ready to pound Marcus Buchanan into dust. She cursed her brother with furious thumbs. *Dropping me a block from the requested coordinates isn't going to keep him alive, brother mine.*

Even in an inch square on her screen, Jamie's face was grim. *You know why he asked.*

Nell jammed her phone into her pocket. She did-and that might earn her quarry a merciful death before she threw him in the cauldron.

MARCUS BUCHANAN! Sparks flew out of her fingers, fire power barely leashed. Where the hell was he?

Right behind you. The last words of a dead man walking.

She spun around, hands ready to throttle him where he stood-and ran into baby instead. Morgan looked up in drooly contentment from his chest.

Nell yanked for control, shaking with the effort. "You utter bastard." She fought with words now, her wrath a hissing, living thing.

"Very possibly." He spoke quietly, his eyes on her still-sparking fingers. She felt his shields snap into place around Morgan. "What is it you think I've done?"

"You asked Aervyn to wrap her in a heat spell. To keep her warm."

He nodded, very slowly. "I did." His voice was calm, but his mind shook. "I hoped it might help if she ends up in the mists."

It was exactly that possibility that terrified her. And she didn't have enough control to play nice. "She could *die*, Marcus. Morgan could die-and you asked him for the last spell she'd be wearing as she did."

The words hit him like bullets, body jerking in anguish as it

drained of blood.

She fired again, perilously close to shattering. “He’s *five.*”

“I know.” He spoke from some place an eternity away. “So was I.”

His whisper tore at her soul. Oh, God. She was stripping skin off the one person in the world who knew exactly how her son would feel. She reached out a hand, abject apology and mama grizzly both. “It would break him. I can’t let you do that.”

“I’m sorry.” He nodded, his words still barely a whisper. “I love her. I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

The last of Nell’s anger fled, flattened by the ferocious love storming in his eyes.

It was the answer she’d needed-and perhaps the only one she could forgive.

She reached for fire power, controlled now, and held out her hands in mute offering. “It won’t break me.”

His eyes shadowed in confusion.

Nell touched a gentle finger to Morgan’s cheek. “My son isn’t the only one who can warm a towel.”

“Thank you.” The twin waves of gratitude and guilt nearly knocked her over. “I’m so very sorry.”

He was-and it was undoing her. She shook her head, stumbling for solid ground. Tears totally messed up fire magic. “There was no one to stand for you back then. They were all hurting too much.”

“I know.” His voice was a raspy pit of sadness. “Your son is a very fortunate witchling.”

“He is.” Nell reached out again for a round baby cheek. “But he’s not the only one.”

She looked up-and hoped Marcus could read the respect in her eyes.

***

Jamie laid his head on the desk in relief.

Ginia paused her mad typing. “What’s up?”

“Your mom didn’t kill Uncle Marcus.” It had been a disturbingly close call.

“That’s good.” His child labor seemed unconcerned. “I wanna know what she did to my warding here. Do you know what these lines are doing?” She spun her monitor around so he could see it.

Many more lines of code, and his eyeballs would be begging for mercy. “Which lines?” His eyes scanned the ones she highlighted.

They read like stone tablet hieroglyphics. “No clue.” And that wasn’t exactly comforting.

Ginia scowled at the screen and popped a cold French fry in her mouth. “It’s layering something, but it’s calling a variable I’ve never seen.” She looked up. “*Somebody’s* not commenting their code properly.”

That was a fairly grievous offense when they had seven people with admin-level access. “Did you sandbox it?”

Her eye roll was more than enough answer.

He swiped one of her fries. “We’ve been working on this a long time, kiddo. Sometimes it’s easy to forget the basics.”

She shook her head, still clicking on keys. “It doesn’t activate. It just kind of… slinks.”

That was a frightening description. “Let’s take a look, then.” No slinky code on his watch. He highlighted the variable name and ran a quick search.

Ginia smirked when nothing came up. “Told you.”

Jamie had learned a thing or two from their resident hacker. “Maybe we have some hidden system files.”

“A worm?” Her eyes gleamed. “Or a magical Trojan horse?”

It was probably a bad sign when your team got excited by possible security breaches. “Let’s check the logs, see who added the code.”

Ginia groaned-checking the logs was about as much fun as painting a room beige. “Can’t we set a trap instead? Dad showed us how to do that.” She grinned. “I can turn the miscreant’s game points all pink.”

“Miscreant” was the Realm word of the week. Jamie had no idea how it had started, but gamers were suddenly dropping it in casual conversations all over the kingdom. “I don’t think this is a section of code a gamer is likely to have messed with, sweetheart.” Morgan’s Castle had joined Moira’s Meadow as off limits, game-wise.

“Fine. I’ll check the code.” Ginia peered into her fry box, and then pitched it in disgust.

He watched, impressed, as the box sailed into the far garbage can. “Nice toss.”

She grinned. “We’ve been practicing.”

“Excellent.” He tugged on a stray curl. “If the whole witching thing doesn’t work out, you can take up pro basketball.”

She snorted. “I’m a girl, silly. I can do both.”

Of that, he had very little doubt. “Come on upstairs-I think Nat’s reheating spaghetti for lunch.”

“Nope.” Ginia shot one last look at her lines of mystery code. “She’s doing yoga in the back yard. Sierra’s sleeping with Kenna, and I

think Mia's cooking."

It was sometimes hard to remember he had only one child. "Mia's cooking, or Mia's warming spaghetti?" The latter was probably safe.

"Dunno." Mischief landed in Ginia's mind with both feet. "She might be making smoothies."

Oh, hell. The last time Mia had used a blender, they'd scraped pink stuff off the ceiling for a week. Jamie headed for the stairs.

Ginia was hot on his heels. Apparently she didn't want to miss anything good.

***

Marcus sat on his front porch, watching the random game of something resembling soccer that had broken out in the street. It was a beautiful afternoon, and the residents of Fisher's Cove had poured out of their cottages in response. Some gardened. A talkative group repaired nets on Uncle Billy's driveway. And several of the grownups, including Mike and Aaron, had joined the kids in the street.

"Nice day." Sophie walked up the side steps of his porch. "Morgan sleeping?"

He couldn't even work up a good growl-somehow, he'd gotten far too used to drop-in company. "For now."

It occurred to him that she had no baby in tow, and Mike was currently chasing a black-and-white ball down the street. "Where's Adam?"

"Asleep in Aunt Moira's flowers. He and Mike went out on the boat with Uncle Billy this morning."

One day soon, he needed to take Morgan out-but he dared not go too early in the morning. They stayed in Realm until the sun crept high into the sky.

Sophie sat down on the glider beside him, ignoring the other perfectly good chairs on his porch. "I have something for you." She held out her hand, mind carefully casual.

He raised an eyebrow at the key on her palm. No one in Fisher's Cove locked anything. "What's it open?"

"My old house." She watched her husband toss the ball back down the road. "The one in Colorado, well away from all large bodies of water."

He ignored the clenching in his gut. "You still have it?" She'd been in Fisher's Cove for almost a year.

"It was Mike's wedding gift to me." She traced the lines of the

key. “I’m a solitary witch, and sometimes I need a place to be truly alone. My husband understood that far better than I did.”

A second eyebrow joined the first. “You go back?”

“Not often now.” Amusement stirred in her eyes. “The gardens are overrun, and dust bunnies seem to evade the cleaning spells.”

He had his own collection hiding under the bed, breeding and occasionally attacking the cat. And he knew her offer had nothing to do with dust bunnies. She offered him a gift-distance and solitude.

The thing he’d been craving every day for a year.

And as he sat on his porch, watching the everyday life of Fisher’s Cove bask in the sun, he knew he didn’t want to take it. “We don’t know that she’d be safer there.”

“No, we don’t.” Sophie’s eyes were steady. “I’m not saying you should go.”

Her mind was hazy, and he wasn’t willing to intrude. “What are you saying?”

“That you have a choice.” Her grin was wry. “Although the housekeeping staff at Morgan’s Castle might not make it a very attractive one.”

He watched Sean race into Moira’s garden after a stray ball. And felt truth slide into his heart, along with the late-afternoon sun. “I’ll take her to Colorado if need be.” For now, he’d fight from Realm-that’s where his troops were, and the magnificent fortress they’d built. But he’d go anywhere he had to go to keep his girl safe.

And then they’d come home.

To a village, and a ramshackle cottage with dust bunnies under the bed.

***

“Wanna have another baby?”

Nell looked up at her husband-and gaped. “After Aervyn? Are you crazy?”

He shrugged. “Jamie won’t share Kenna, and Leo says he’s too big to ride in a baby carrier anymore.”

Leo had just turned three, so that seemed like a reasonable claim. Nell shut her laptop-something was afoot at Witch Central. Code could wait, and after a very emotional morning, she could use a distraction. Something her husband likely knew. “What’s going on?”

He grinned. “Nothing.”

Yeah. And cute pink pigs were currently invading the North Pole.

“Try again. How come you’re trying to steal a baby? Never mind, forget that-how come Jamie won’t share?”

“He got the first prototype to test.” Daniel looked like someone had stolen his favorite teddy bear. “I had to hitchhike all the way to Nova Scotia to get the other one.”

Nell tried not to laugh-Aervyn came by his pouty face honestly. “And exactly what is this prototype?”

Her husband pulled something fuzzy and purple out from behind his back. “We might have kind of raided your fabric stash. Kenna liked fuzzy best.”

Nell stared. It resembled a baby sling-one that had accidentally fallen into a vat of misfit toys. Slowly, she circled the fuzzy purple monstrosity. “What *is* it?”

“A new baby carrier. Ginia called it the KidPocket.” He winced. “Since we apparently aren’t very creative at naming things, I think it’s gonna stick.”

If Ginia was involved, that explained the purple fabric raid. “And you invented a new baby carrier because…?”

“It needed to be done.” Daniel shrugged. “We had what, fifteen carriers?”

At least.

He threw the pouch contraption over his head. “And not one of them had a beer opener. Bad design.” He held up the feature in question. “So we fixed it. See? And right next to it, a handy-dandy sleeve to hold a beer. Undo the Velcro bottom and it works great for light sabers, too.”

Light sabers. Oh, God. She reached for a chair, plunking down in an unceremonious heap of giggles.

Daniel patted the saber holder with pride. “Highly useful. Lizzie keeps launching sneak attacks, and Marcus never has a sword handy when he needs one.”

Marcus was engaging in spontaneous sword fights*?*

“Fatherhood changes a man.” Her husband grinned. “Wait until you see Jamie’s special feature.”

Nell had lived through a lifetime of Jamie’s special features. “Does it squirt?”

Daniel’s face fell. “Damn, you’re good.” He patted some sort of black pouch hanging off the side of the carrier contraption. “Milk cooler. Has a little hose thingie to pipe milk to the baby.”

She was pretty sure babies didn’t drink milk from hoses. “They tend to prefer nipples.”

Her husband wiggled his eyebrows. “I know.” He motioned her over and guided her hand inside the main part of the carrier. “Meet my contribution-boob pillows.”

Sure enough. Her husband's chest currently sported two very breast-like contraptions. He grinned. "Jamie found some research study that said babies fall asleep 53% faster curled up to their mother's chest. We're just equalizing things a little."

Only grown men could find a scientific basis for fake boobs. "And it took the two of you how long to come up with this?"

"Two?" Daniel looked blank for a moment. "Marcus is the main engineer behind all this genius. Aaron and Mike helped too-they added the baby toys." He reached into the carrier and held them up. "Fake iPhone, car keys, credit cards, and sea-glass teether. The sea glass is real. The rest we magicked from baby-safe materials. All firmly attached so they can't be pitched overboard or swallowed."

Nell blinked, and touched her finger to the fake iPhone screen. It beeped happily. Okay. That was cool. She looked up at her husband. "I'm still not having another baby." But she mightily appreciated his attempts to cheer her up.

He sighed and kissed the top of her head. "Well, it was worth a try."

She chuckled. "I'm sure you can borrow Kenna when Jamie's done playing with her."

"I think Devin's next. Maybe Aaron will share-he's got two." Daniel patted his carrier, thoughtful. "I wonder if we can rig this thing to carry two babies? There's got to be a market for that."

Nell just shook her head. "You guys are really going to make this thing, aren't you." It wasn't a question-she knew her man.

"Yup." Her husband looked like Aervyn let loose in the Lego store. "I'm building the website, and Jamie knows some engineer who does product certification testing."

She was afraid to ask.

He grinned. "That's where you wear the carrier while bungee jumping or narrowly escaping car crashes. And Devin wants to try broomstick flying."

Nell snorted. "You'd never get Kenna back down from the sky." Her eyes sharpened. "Wait. Devin doesn't have babies. How come he's involved in this?"

"It's bungee jumping," said Daniel, his dimple flashing. "I think he overlooked the babies part."

Drat. No new Sullivans on the way. Yet.

She kissed her husband's cheek. "Go have a daddy play date. And send Elorie back this way. Ginia's got more spa stuff brewing on the stove." Her daughter was apparently having a very busy day.

He grinned. "I know. Why do you think Nathan and Aervyn beat it out of here right after breakfast?"

Silly boys.

Then again, the last batch had smelled a fair amount like skunk.

And with that, she was squarely on her feet again. Life, back to crazy normal. She reached up to kiss her husband's cheek. "Thanks."

He didn't say anything. He didn't have to.

***

Marcus stood on the cliff's edge and looked out over sand and water. It always pulled him back.

The beach had been their plaything, the place where he and Evan came to worship boyhood. A stretch of sand just outside the village, divided from humanity by the rock promontory under his feet. They'd felt like explorers. Or pirates of old, discovering the shores of America.

Historical truth had never interfered overmuch with their quests.

It had taken a long list of rules and an Act of Dad, the day after their fifth birthday, to gain permission to visit the beach alone.

For the next three months, he and Evan had practically lived there, two small boys dizzy with freedom and a world that stretched further than their eyes could see.

And then Marcus had woken one night and found himself standing on the beach, screaming Evan's name and hurling magic at a force he couldn't see.

His brother's body had still been back in his bed, tucked in with a life-sized bear and an illicit baseball. His soul-gone. Vanished into the mists.

At first, coming back to the beach had been an act of fractured, anguished hope. Marcus had stared over the waters, willing Evan back out of the evil green fog.

He'd never come. Time and tears had eventually eroded the hope, but Marcus still made regular pilgrimages to the beach. Some days, he got no further than the rock promontory before pain chased him back to safer ground.

Not today.

Marcus stepped off the rock point, making his way down the narrow, winding path to the sand. He cursed as pebbles slid under his feet. Damn old-man shoes.

He'd come with intentions, and they didn't involve landing in an ignominious pile. A few more steps and he reached the relatively easier footing of sand and seaweed. Small birds feasting on beach detritus skittered out of the way as he advanced, then closed ranks behind him again. Survival stopped for no man.

He headed straight for the midpoint of the beach. There was a nexus there-a point of balance between land and sea, east and west. The place his magic would be strongest.

Power surged as he arrived, water and air responding to his call. He was a witch at the peak of his powers-and it was time to use them.

He turned to the sea, arms stretched to the sky.

"I call on water, toss and turn,
I call on air, meld and burn,
Build a storm, loud and free,
As I will, so mote it be."

He kept it short-the storm was already well underway. With deft hands, he twisted currents of air, bending them double and tossing them into frothing water. Lightning flashed, long crackling columns running flat out to sea. East.

The lightning was a new trick. Marcus smiled grimly. He'd learned a thing or two from Sierra Brighton.

For the first time in forty-three years, he wanted the mists to hear him. Faster now, he slammed energies together, fueling a fog of magic and rage. *Evan!* Crackling magic amplified his call. *EVAN!*

He didn't listen for an answer. There wouldn't be one, and Marcus Buchanan had long since stopped begging his brother to talk.

Today, he only wanted him to hear. Hands fisted, Marcus faced the mists-with a message. It was short, sweet, and he flung it with every ounce of power he possessed.

You can't have her.

His magic died, the spluttering halt of a witch out of gas.

The witch was done. The man had barely begun. He had wards. A warming spell. A castle, a team. And a reason to fight.

He wasn't living scared anymore.

Chapter 18

Sophie looked out the window of the inn, trying to identify the source of the commotion-and saw Marcus standing in the street, surrounded by clamoring children, Morgan strapped in her familiar position on his chest.

His gaudy, purple-paisley chest. Perfectly matched to the gaudy purple baby carrier.

She didn't say a word. She couldn't. Giggling helplessly, she motioned Elorie and Aunt Moira to the window.

"Oh. Oh, dear." Moira managed a few words around convulsive laughter. "Did wee Lizzie help him shop, then?"

That seemed like an unfair commentary on their youngest healer's fashion sense.

Elorie, the artist of the group, just looked pained. "Maybe he's color blind."

"Perhaps-" Moira's laughter hiccupped to a stop. "Perhaps it's a hopeful sign. Coming out of his shell, so to speak."

Sophie grinned. "It's a pretty purple. Kind of matches Morgan's eyes."

Aaron rolled into the room, a tray of berries and scones in his hands. "What's up?"

"Uncle Marcus got new shirts," said his wife, with a more-or-less straight face.

"Great." Aaron laid his tray on the table. "He said Morgan had puked on all his old ones, so I sent him to that website you shop on for all of my stuff."

"I think-" Elorie spluttered to a stop, gasping for air. "I think he took a wrong turn into the retro Hawaiian beachwear section."

Aaron stared a moment at his wife, dissolved onto the couch in a pile of giggles. And then walked over to look out the window. Sophie watched as he manfully swallowed. Several times. "Well, it's not black."

"Indeed it's not," said Moira staunchly, lips quirking. "I think I'll

just go put on one of my sunniest skirts. We could use a little more color around here."

Lizzie burst in the door of the Inn. "Sophie! Gran! I need something purple to wear. Uncle Marcus said it's Purple People Eater Day and anyone who isn't wearing purple might end up getting eaten by the one-eyed monster." She didn't look at all upset by this possibility. "He's gonna teach us the song and everything."

Marcus knew the Purple People Eater song? Sophie looked over at Aaron. "This is still Fisher's Cove, right?"

He just shrugged his shoulders, eyes twinkling. "No idea, but I'll go bake more scones. Pretty sure we're about to get overrun by witches."

Absolutely. Marcus gone crazy was bound to be a tourist attraction. Sophie grinned and grabbed Lizzie's hand. "Come on. I'm pretty sure I have purple glitter glue tucked away in one of my healer kits." It fixed any number of minor ailments, but she was willing to sacrifice for a good cause.

Lizzie danced a quick jig. "I bet Gran will let us pick some of her purple flowers, too."

Also likely.

They were about to have a party. Instigated by Marcus Buchanan, a shopping disaster, and a bright-eyed girl with purple eyes.

Sophie shook her head. Wonders would never cease.

***

Moira slipped into her garden, a pair of shears in her hand, and discovered Sophie already there. "Standing guard, are you?"

"I promised Lizzie the last of the purple flowers." She looked behind her ruefully. "Good thing Ginia's bringing some backup-I think we're down to a couple of fairly sad specimens."

Young Ginia's garden was bold, creative, and festooned with purple. "I was just hoping for a wee gardenia for my hair."

Sophie grinned. "How do you feel about white or yellow?"

Moira looked down at her bright floral dress and purple hand-knit scarf. She looked a bit like a garden explosion already. "Either of those ought to do nicely." She smiled, mentally running through her list. "And a bit of mint for the lemonade, and let's see if we have any beets we can speed up a little, shall we? I've a mind to make some purple soup."

"Aaron's making blueberry squish muffins." Sophie leaned into

the herb patch, snipping competently. “And last I heard, Sean and Kevin were trying to turn some poor, unsuspecting corn-on-the-cob purple.”

She’d eaten stranger things. “Uncle Billy’s bringing us in a nice load of lobster.” The spring ones always tasted the nicest, and if the pinging of her phone was any indication, there was quite the crowd coming.

Once upon a time, she’d owned nary a device that pinged.

Sophie held out a basket brimful with purple mint. “Enough?”

“Barring a full-scale invasion.” Moira took the basket, enjoying the lively aroma of mint and flower cuttings. “Has my nephew gone into hiding yet?” The last she’d heard, Lizzie had been trying to convince him to run purple streamers down from the church steeple.

“No.” Sophie smiled quietly. “He’s on your front porch. Helping Sean turn T-shirts purple.”

Moira felt the lump hit her throat, and looked around for a place to sit. She needed to shed a few tears before this party got underway.

Sophie tucked in beside her, a soothing arm around her shoulders. “He’s finally becoming the man you’ve always believed him to be.”

“He is.” Moira let the tears trickle down her cheeks. She didn’t speak of what might come. Of what *was* coming-she felt it in her bones. “I hope it’s enough.”

Sophie looked out at the garden for a long, long time. And then touched Moira’s hand in quiet comfort. “It’s the flowers that bloom last that hold best against the fall frosts.”

Aye. And this flower was finally planting himself in good, strong soil. But in the end, the frosts almost always won.

***

Jamie looked over at Daniel. “At what point do you think we’re supposed to step in and carry him home?”

Daniel grinned. “If I’d known he’d be this happy a drunk, I’d have gotten him sloshed fifteen years ago.”

“There’s not a drop of alcohol in him.” Moira squeezed in between them, two glasses of mint lemonade in her hands.

Jamie looked over at Marcus, leading a rousing and entirely off-key rendition of Purple People Eaters. They’d finally found someone who sang badly with more enthusiasm than Aervyn. And none of the several dozen people who’d crashed a quiet day in Fisher’s Cove seemed to mind.

Nor did the villagers. Jamie was pretty sure an impromptu lobster bake was in the works. Which was good-that way there would be someone awake to play with Kenna at 2 a.m. Maybe he'd actually get to sleep with his wife for a change. He spotted her happy head, dancing with the triplets while a growing crowd belted out the Purple People Eater chorus.

No one loved a spontaneous party more than Nat.

Moira slid a glass into his hand. "The babies are all still napping. I checked."

So had Jamie. All five of them, lined up in baskets on Moira's porch, happily sleeping through enough noise to wake the dead. "I dropped the TV remote yesterday and it woke Kenna up."

Daniel snorted. "Nathan slept through all four home games of the world series. But if a chair creaked while he slept? Nell threatened to send me to remedial ninja training."

If there was such a thing, he was signing up. Jamie squeezed Moira's shoulders and collected Daniel's empty glass. Time to go see if Aaron needed help feeding this crew.

He made it two steps. And then sun-bright power flashed from Moira's porch.

The babies.

Jamie got there first-but only because he ported. Marcus thundered onto the porch an instant later, one blazing ball of purple fury.

One look at Morgan, and they both knew. She had the still, terrifying translucence of a body that had just parted with its soul.

And then Jamie looked at his own daughter, and his fear went nuclear. He dropped to his knees at her side, yanking for power and screaming. *KENNA!*

Gone. She wasn't there. His sweet girl was gone.

He looked up into his wife's eyes, their worst nightmare alive and hunting. And clawed, one fingernail at a time, back onto the ledge of sanity. *Marcus. Nell. Sophie. Devin. We need a circle. NOW.*

He'd named the four points. He trusted they'd collect the witches they needed.

Aervyn charged through the crowd, Lauren on his heels. *I can cast, Uncle Jamie. I can do it.*

It would shame Jamie for eternity that for just a split second, he considered it. And then he bent down and cradled the boy he loved like his own son. "Not today, superboy. I'll cast. I need you to monitor, okay? Help Lauren-it's going to be a really big job."

He zeroed in on Lauren with the tightest mind channel he could muster. *If I don't come back, you break the connection. Don't let him come after me.*

Lauren turned sheet white. And nodded.

Spinning around, Jamie looked for his circle. And found them already pulling power. Nell on fire point, eyes blazing. She would give everything she had for his little girl.

Sophie leading earth's trio, her husband at her shoulder. She'd already linked with Nell. They'd buy him every second of warmth possible.

Devin, water witch and warrior, holding monumental power in his hands. Jamie blinked at the sheer volume-and then saw Sierra and Lizzie behind him.

Praying, Jamie turned to the last element. It was air that would power the journey he had to take-and Marcus was the strongest air witch of their generation.

If he could function.

Jamie met the eyes of the man who would hold his life in his hands-and looked deep. Beyond the horror, beyond the desperate, screaming fear.

And found what he needed. Solid rock. Reaching out, he touched Nat's mind with wordless love-and then stretched his arms to the sky.

"Earth, water, fire, and air,
The need is great and so we dare
to ask for speed of thought and flight
to find the two now lost to sight.
One of me, and four times three
As we will, so mote it be."

Jamie felt power explode in his hands. Damn. They had some seriously hyped-up witches. *Astral plane, people, not the moon.*

The power dimmed. Some.

Fine. Soon enough, he'd need it all.

Carefully, ignoring the queasy feeling in his belly, Jamie leaned into the column of power at his back. His own magic spasmed in his veins, rejecting the invasion. Jamie leaned harder, ruthless, and felt his consciousness splitting off, tethered only by the circle's magic. One quiver and he'd be the astral plane's next permanent resident.

Him and two very unhappy, hungry girls.

A wisp of humor floated through the torrent of magic. Someone with the bravery to laugh. Jamie grabbed it with both magical hands-laughter was life!-and rode it up into the sky. Seeking. Reaching.

Gray clouded all his senses. Jamie trusted thirty years of training and ignored it.

Kenna!

For now, he had to trust the two would be together. If they

weren't, he'd cross that terrifying bridge when it came. His magic would seek a lot more easily for the child of his blood.

Slowly, not wanting to shake the circle, he separated the power streams at his back. Leaning hard on Nell and her trio, he sent out a web of fire power, like seeking like. Kenna's strongest magic was fire-and the deeper they got into the astral world, the less useful it would be.

Next he reached to Devin. Blood of Kenna's blood-and there was no water anywhere he couldn't bond with. Shedding the innate distrust of a fire witch for anything liquid, Jamie slid into the mists, using his brother's strength to feed flowing currents of power.

KENNA!

He was getting cold. Relentlessly, he tugged on the earth trio's flow and felt the healing gift packaged with it. His circle was getting creative-and his feet were no longer going numb.

The webs of water and air had stretched as far as magic could take them. Time to mindseek. Jamie shaped a channel and discovered that his mind talents were far less clunky than usual. Marcus. Hot damn.

The gray was thicker now, a choking fog that seemed to swallow magic whole.

Silently, Jamie pushed with his mind-and thanks to his wife, with his heart. *Kenna, lovey-show me where you are. It's time to go home, baby girl.* He pictured her in his mind-whole, safe, and holding tight to a tiny girl with purple eyes that matched her daddy's shirt. And then laughed as the obvious hit. This was a world of cold, wet dark-his little fire witch would be mad as hell.

Surer now, he reached into the eternal gray, wishing a temper tantrum into his arms.

A whisper at first-so faint he wasn't sure it was real.

And then again.

Hope blasting, he swam through the fog. Nothing. Silence. Frantic now, he yanked at the circle's power flows. Not fire-they were in too deep for that. He could feel Devin's fierceness, swimming in the mist beside him.

Kenna!

Not Kenna. Morgan. The words were feather-dust light, pushed into the sky through a mountain of power.

Jamie froze, in agony-and then he understood. It was Morgan who had carried them away. It was her trail he needed to find.

The father in him screamed in protest, but the witch understood.

MORGAN!

The cold was beginning to suck at him. He dared not imagine what it did to small girls. Purple eyes. He looked for purple eyes.

And this time, the whisper of sound came with more power. Jamie swam forward, struggling against the enervating gray cold-and then felt a tornado hit his back. Marcus.

Jamie clung to the funnel with everything he had-and trusted a father's love.

It was Morgan's eyes he saw first, blazing through the mists. And then his furious daughter, throwing spluttering bolts of fire at the cold.

Jamie wrapped them both tight in his arms-and waited for the love of twelve to reel them home.

***

Marcus wrapped his hands around the tall green glass and chugged, immune to its taste by now.

It was his third.

His abused power channels still hurt, but it no longer felt like an army of fire ants trying to eat their way out. One last gulp and he set the glass back into the hands of the witch who had delivered it. "I think that's enough."

"I should hope so," said Moira briskly, patting the pillow behind his head. "The last time I had to dose you three times was when you got into Uncle Billy's whiskey stash."

He was pretty sure her intent back then had been punishment, not cure. Marcus looked down at the small girl curled up in his lap like a sleeping kitten. "I had to do it."

"Uncle Billy surely didn't think so."

He watched her shuffle things around on a tray, making room for a glass that would have fit in the first place. "In the circle. Jamie was running out of bandwidth. I had to give him a push."

"Did I say any different?" She reached in behind him again, poking and squishing, her forehead inches from his. And for just a fraction of a moment, his battered mental powers functioned, and he felt her soul shaking.

He should have known. Her Irish always thickened in sorrow and fear. He stopped her hands as gently as he could. "Enough with the infernal pillow plumping. I'm fine." He glanced down at Morgan. "We both are."

Her breath caught.

He ignored it. The rock of his life was terrified-and he needed her brave. "We're in a castle guarded by the world's best coding team and

half the witches of Realm." He touched her cheek. "And if Aervyn's been let loose again, probably a couple of alligators, too."

He could feel her mighty heart finding its footing as he spoke.

So he kept talking. Babbling. "Ginia says Aaron's got the kitchen under control, the garden's a mess, and Kenna's learning to crawl out on the ramparts."

Moira sniffled, brushing invisible crumbs off his chest. "She's a fierce wee thing, that one. Didn't even stop for a nap first."

He dug for his best gruff bachelor voice. "She'll end up alligator bait if she's not careful."

"Alligators don't eat witches." The light in her eyes was dim-but it was there. "Aervyn promised me so."

He could feel the boost from the green goo fading. "We can always dangle him over the moat and see what happens."

"His toes are pretty stinky." Moira laid a hand on his forehead, eyes twinkling properly now. "And Nell would dangle you next."

She would. He could feel his eyes getting heavy. Blasted healers and their sleep spells. He had things to do.

"Tomorrow," said Moira softly. "We'll watch over you both tonight."

He smiled as he faded into haze. His rock was back.

Chapter 19

Marcus stood on the high tower walk of Morgan's castle, missing his remote mountain keep. He craved its solitude far less now, but he'd always slept well there. His kingdom for a decent night's sleep.

Morgan had woken at 2 a.m. on the dot, entirely recovered from her ordeal and ready to play.

He needed to reprogram the castle guards. They were rather surly in the middle of the night.

Fortunately, morning had brought a trio of cheery babysitters and a bacon-biscuit breakfast. He munched on the biscuit and watched the girls, playing with Morgan on the ramparts below.

As prisons went, it was a happy one.

"You're a hard man to track down."

Only fancy footwork and a damn fast levitation spell kept him from spilling his very real brains on the virtual rocks below. "What the hell are *you* doing here?"

His visitor smiled. "You know who I am, do you?"

There couldn't be two gold-spangled mediums capable of waltzing into Realm whenever they pleased. "Adele Underwood, Las Vegas fraud."

Her eyes sparked with irritation. "I came to deliver a message. You keep being rude to me and I'll walk back the way I came."

"Right." Marcus turned away, looking over the lands that would be his home for the foreseeable future. Dust bunnies would have to wait until Morgan's power stabilized. "Let me guess. This one can be mine for the low price of $4.99 a minute."

"You don't like who I am or what I do." Adele's voice hinted at volcanoes. The non-dormant kind. "But mostly I think you're mad as hell that your brother decided to talk to me instead of coming to you."

"You might say that." Marcus liked the two-foot height advantage the tower walk was currently giving him. "I'm mad as hell about a lot of things."

"So I've heard," said Adele briskly, climbing up beside him. "He

can't come to you, you know. He says you fear the mists."

"The mists are evil." The touch of them yesterday still shuddered in his brain.

"No." Adele waved at his head guardsman, staring up in slack-jawed shock. "They're dangerous, but that's entirely different. Evan's magic works through the mists-he can't talk to anyone without them."

"Like hell." Marcus whirled, a sword in his hands before he even thought it. "I spent a thousand terrified nights under my bed with the mists licking my toes." And he'd have gladly given his life to them for just one word from Evan.

"And your brother spent those thousand nights crying on the other side of the veil." Adele pushed the sword out of his nerveless fingers. "It took years for him to grow into his magic, just as it did for you. You weren't the only small boy sad and alone."

He'd have sworn his heart had no blood left. He'd have been wrong. Words scraped out over the jagged nails in his throat. "Then why did he go?"

She only shook her head. "I don't know."

He did. Because something greater than the love of a brother had called. And Evan had answered without looking back even once. Into the mists and forever away.

"He was five." Ring-bedecked hands closed over his. "Just a boy, and facing magic far bigger than he'd ever known." Adele blew out a harsh breath. "You both were."

He hadn't blamed Evan. Then. Now might be a different story.

Adele turned to look over the scenery one last time. "He has a very specific message for you. Perhaps it makes a little more sense to me now." She turned her head in his direction. "He says to stop being such a stupid-head."

Marcus teetered, memory swamping him. His brother, always inventive, had armed some of Aunt Moira's gardenias with fire power, and they'd been playing flower wars.

A fun game until their owner had walked out her back door and Evan, devilish gleam in his eyes, had taken aim at her skirts. Marcus's mind-hissed "stop being such a stupid-head" hadn't deterred his brother in the slightest, but it had left no doubt who the culprits were-in his haste, he'd sprayed the mindsend into every head within two blocks.

It had been the first time they'd met the inside of Aunt Moira's cauldron. Two scrubbing pads-Evan's for misuse of magic, and Marcus's for misuse of the English language.

Stupid-head. Well, if Evan thought he was being every kind of idiot, he could bloody well show up and say so. "I don't suppose he sent you anything more useful than that?"

Adele shook her head. “He seemed tired.” She raised an eyebrow. “But I got the distinct impression the two of you’d had some kind of argument.”

Marcus snorted. “I can hardly argue with a figment of your imagination.” Throwing a witch temper tantrum on Evan’s beach wasn’t arguing. And he’d meant every word. The mists weren’t getting Morgan, even if they had to spend the next year living in Realm to prevent it.

A ring-laden hand touched his arm gently. “Some advice from a nosy fraud?”

He sighed. Maybe she was a witch after all-they all seemed to feel a need to pelt him with advice he didn’t want.

She waved a hand in the direction of the ramparts, swarming with life. “Spend more time down there and less time up here.”

“I needed time to think.” He didn’t bother to scowl-she seemed immune.

“You need time to live.” Adele’s eyes got all grandmothery and soft. “If there’s something that oversized head of yours is supposed to figure out, it will come to you.”

It sounded oddly like Daniel’s connect-the-dots advice. “You think great insights come while changing poopy diapers, do you?”

Gold-laméd laughter rolled out over Morgan’s castle. “They certainly can. And if that doesn’t work, you could always try scrubbing cauldrons.” She winked. And then she was gone.

***

Nell crept into the Witches’ Lounge, sliding the door shut behind her, and almost caught Sophie’s hand in the process. Oops.

Holding a finger to her lips, she eased Sophie through the half-open door-and discovered Moira hot on her heels. The moment they were all in, she threw up a soundproofing spell two feet thick. “There, that might buy us half an hour.” Only maybe-as half of the duo that ran Realm, she was in hot demand at the moment.

Sophie winced. “Is it slowing down any?”

“I don’t think so.” Moira seated herself on a comfortable chair, activating a tea spell on her tablet. “I had to chase a flock of orange bunnies out of my cornflowers this morning.”

Furry animals were the least of Nell’s current problems-not everyone setting up camp near Morgan’s castle had Marcus’s coding skills.

Sophie sank gratefully onto the couch. “Kevin’s programming is getting pretty good, if you want to add him to your spell-mishaps team.”

“He’s already been deputized.” Along with every other sane and reasonably competent coder she could find. “And Sean’s organizing a sword fight, which might at least burn enough game points to limit mischief for the rest of the afternoon.” Hard work and hard play-the standard witch recipe for crisis.

Moira’s eyes were gentle. “How’s Jamie doing?”

“Sticking close to Kenna.” Nell’s body still hummed with the fire power she’d poured into the circle. For now, it was doing a decent job of holding the terrible fear at bay. “And Nat’s a burr at his side.”

It had been Nat who’d held Kenna’s lifeless body as Jamie threw all the magic of a full circle after her soul. A beacon of steady love, calling them both home. Nell had never seen a greater act of mama courage.

And then she’d found Nat, several hours later, tucked into a lonely corner and crying a quiet bucket of tears. There were some fears that even the love of Witch Central couldn’t touch.

“We didn’t know,” said Moira softly. “No traveler has ever gone during the day.”

“Or taken anyone else.” Nell felt the all-too-familiar blend of terror and frustration slide over her heart-she had five years of experience with witchlings of exceptional power and magic that didn’t play by the rules.

“The old magics are usually the ones that change the least.” Moira’s voice carried a guilt that twisted through the room like a living thing. “Morgan’s powers…”

Yeah. The garden variety of astral travel was plenty frightening enough. A mutant form seemed like a weight they simply shouldn’t have to bear.

“We can’t crumble.” Sophie levered herself out of the couch, seemingly finding strength in the sheer act of standing. “Marcus is still fighting, and the last thing he needs is the rest of us giving up just because it’s gotten difficult.”

It had gotten a lot more than difficult, but Nell took her point. She and Daniel had raised a family in the shadow of life-threatening magic-and the days went by a lot better if you shoveled the fear into a garbage can and got on with the business of living.

Time to go dispense cookies, hugs, and swords.

***

Seeking the company of others was new and strange behavior for Marcus Buchanan. He'd wanted the sounds of laughter close by. And a reminder that the fight was never over.

He'd found them in spades.

He looked up and shook his head in wonderment, amusement somehow bubbling up despite the weight on his shoulders. What twelve-year-old boy wandered through the middle of a thirty-person sword fight, his nose buried in a stack of books-and emerged unscathed?

Kevin looked up as he finished crossing the street and grinned. "Aunt Moira taught me how to set a sword-repelling spell."

A what? Marcus diverted an errant spellcube before it smacked the boy in the head. Or worse, woke the baby sleeping on his chest. "What on earth is that?"

"It's old Irish housewife magic." Kevin set down his stack of books on the sad excuse for a table the Realm village bar set outside on sunny days. Morgan's Castle was temporarily out of food, so business was brisk. "She says you never know when a faerie might decide to throw a teacup at you. Or a frying pan."

"Sounds like faeries have quite the temper," said Marcus dryly. And Aunt Moira had quite the imagination.

"So do some witches." Kevin looked pointedly in Lizzie's direction. "Are you sure it was a good idea to give her a saber?"

Rather belatedly, but yes, he did. "I armed you and Sean-it only seems fair Lizzie can defend herself, no?" Then again, the witchling in question was currently on top of a good-sized boulder, whacking away at grown men in armor with abandon. Good thing she had nine virtual lives-or however many Jamie had granted her in honor of the day's battle.

Witches, thumbing their noses at fear. He was making a sizable effort to do the same. Let the dots connect how they might. Marcus waved at the waiter. "Another beer for me, and a lemonade for my young scholar friend."

Sean would have taken that as an insult, but Kevin grinned, pleased. "I've been reading, and I found something. Aunt Moira said you're the person to ask."

It was hard to have a civil conversation two feet away from pitched battle, particularly when at least half the participants lacked any weapons training. "Ask about what?"

Kevin's eyes were very serious now. "Magical affinities. She said you're our resident expert."

Indeed. Marcus Buchanan, witch geek. However, he owed young Kevin-without the travelers-live-near-water discovery, there never

would have been any Realm haven. Marcus sighed and pulled a transport spellcube out of his rucksack. “Come with me.”

When they popped out onto the ramparts of his mountain castle keep, Kevin goggled. “You never bring anyone here.”

“I don’t.” But it was freshly warded-he and Morgan now had free run of Realm. Marcus motioned to a nearby guard. “Some refreshments, please.”

The man saluted and withdrew-his old castle staff didn’t talk much. By design.

Kevin let loose something that sounded suspiciously like a snicker. “How come he’s wearing pink slippers?”

Marcus regarded the bunny footwear in disgust. Nothing like a visitor to point out the flaws in your not-so-humble abode. “Warrior Girl magicked them, and she booby-trapped the spell seventeen ways to Friday.”

“Hmm.” Kevin looked thoughtful. “I might be able to make it go away. I’ve been studying some of her spells.”

“Really.” Marcus regarded the boy with significantly more interest. His aunt had sent distraction on many levels.

“It’s what good researchers do.” Kevin leaned over the ramparts. Carefully. His twin brother would have been dangling by an ankle by now. “We read, and study, and then when you least expect it, we spring a surprise attack.”

Oh, *really*. Marcus made a mental note to stick a tracking spell on the quiet little librarian who had qualified for level seven barely two weeks ago. “Laying in a strategy, are you?”

Kevin blushed, pushing back from the ramparts. “Not yet. This level’s kind of crazy.”

It was. And Kevin was the second-youngest arrival ever. “You did well to get here.”

The boy looked gobsmacked.

Bloody hell-you’d think he never handed out compliments.

Morgan stirred on his chest, and then settled in for the second half of her nap. Time to get down to business, then. Magical affinities-those ought to bore even Kevin within the hour. Marcus nodded toward the stack of books. “What did you bring me?”

Kevin held up his hands, a tiny whirlwind hovering over one, a rain-laden cloud floating above the other.

Marcus blinked-small magics were far harder than they looked, and two at once was nicely done. “You’ve been practicing.”

“Mmm.” The boy switched his gaze back and forth between his two hands, and then neatly blended the magics into a very small, very wet storm.

That was more than nicely done, especially by a witch of Kevin’s

power. “Making the most of your talents, are you?”

“I like to practice.” Kevin flushed again. “Sean says it’s stupid.”

Sean had twice the power and half the control. “Your brother will eventually discover the virtues of practice.” Maybe. “In the meantime, it appears you’ve learned the practical uses of magical affinities.” The boy had nicely used the similarities of air and water flows to blend his storm.

“You saw.” Kevin beamed with quiet pride.

“I’m not blind, youngling.” Marcus nodded in thanks as the guard returned with a tray of food and left. “Water and air have the closest magical affinity. The pattern of their energies is similar, and easy enough to combine.”

He picked up a sandwich and glanced at the boy. “Bet you can’t do the same trick with fire and air.” Fire was fickle, a tricky magic that didn’t like combining with anything.

“I’m close.” Kevin grinned. “But Elorie says if I practice in her house again before I’m fifty, she’s gonna borrow Aunt Moira’s cauldron.”

It was good to know the boy wasn’t entirely lacking the mischief gene. Marcus pushed over the tray. “Have a sandwich, for pity’s sake-I don’t bite. And I can’t help you with fire affinities.” Fire had been Evan’s magic.

“I was wondering.” Kevin reached for food, but his mind was hesitant-witch treading with extreme care. “Air and water magics have the tightest affinity that we know of.”

Marcus wasn’t sure he liked the last four words of that sentence. “There are others, but you’re right-none are as strong.” And if this was going to turn into a lesson on storm magic, he was going to need a change of clothes.

“How do we know?” The gears turned quickly now in Kevin’s head. “We thought mind magic didn’t really look like anything else, but it kind of works like Net power.”

The boy had a point. Vastly different results, but both activated from a web of tiny power channels, rather than a single focus. “Perhaps. An affinity of origin, rather than output.” Interesting idea, and once he’d had some sleep, one he might spend some time considering.

Except Kevin wasn’t done. “Exactly. So what if that wasn’t the only affinity we didn’t know about?”

The clenched feeling was back in Marcus’s gut. “You think we’ve missed another one.” It wasn’t a question-the boy’s mind was springing leaks faster than his cottage’s roof in last month’s freak hailstorm.

“Yeah.” Kevin nodded quietly, fingers absently running up and

down the spine of some dusty book. “Morgan’s happy here in Realm, right? And she doesn’t travel when she’s here.”

Marcus stared, his brain racing to piece together Kevin’s clues. Realm ran on Net power. Morgan traveled. His mind froze as the right neurons finally connected.

It was Kevin, however, who was brave enough to say the words. “Maybe Net power and astral travel are magical affinities.”

The earth tilted on its axis. “Nothing’s like astral travel.” Marcus muttered, mostly to himself. “That’s why it takes an entire circle to call a traveler back. Hard to get the magics to integrate.” So blindingly, impossibly hard. Like calling flames from the ocean.

The light in Kevin’s eyes was fierce. “Maybe we’ve been using the wrong magics.”

Marcus was already there. The best way to fight magic was with its closest affinity. He jumped to his feet, sending Kevin’s half-eaten sandwich soaring. More strange dots. A whole, connect-the-dots swarm of them.

He needed his brain trust again.

Chapter 20

Marcus settled Morgan down on her blanket next to a patch of the blue flowers she liked so damn much. Girls.

Daniel appeared beside him, Kenna yammering away on his hip. “Excellent. Someone to distract this little punk.”

“Pulled uncle duty, did you?” Marcus handed over a beer. A real one. Not technically Realm legal, but he didn’t expect the owner to protest too much-he’d imported half a dozen. Another way to thumb his nose at fear.

“Just transport.” Daniel settled Kenna down and grinned as she butt-scooted over to Morgan. “Jamie and Aervyn are broom flying over the south tower. They’ll be here as soon as he can talk my son down from the sky.”

Only a damn fool taught a five-year-old how to fly a broomstick. Morgan wasn’t ever getting on anything faster than a turtle.

“Good luck with that,” said Jamie wryly, arriving with Aervyn on his shoulders. “And you might want to save Morgan before Kenna feeds her any more flowers.”

Marcus turned, just in time to see Daniel disarm his troublesome niece. The man was fast.

“Keeping me on my toes, are you, munchkin?” Daniel swung her around in the sky, laughing as she shot off fireworks in all directions. “No burning my eyebrows, kiddo, or I’ll sell you at the market.”

“He won’t.” Aervyn plunked down in Marcus’s lap, grinning. “He tries to sell me lots, but Mama says witchlings don’t fetch a very good price.”

Jamie ported his daughter into his own arms, which ratcheted up the squeal volume several decibels. “Thanks, Daniel. Nat’s currently sleeping with some of Ginia’s goo on her face. She’s offered to name our second child after you.” He tossed his daughter into the air. “Presuming this one ever gives us time to procure her a sibling.”

“What’s ‘procure’ mean?” Aervyn looked up at Marcus, cookie crumb mustache fairly well established. “Is he gonna try to buy a baby

at the market?"

That was the kind of question Marcus had no intentions of answering. Ever. He ignored the male snickers behind his head. "I have no earthly idea."

Aervyn crunched into another cookie. "He should talk to Mama about that."

"Here." Daniel peeled the lid off a container of raw vegetables. "Mama says we need to eat more of these, and a few less cookies."

Aervyn looked at a carrot stick with suspicion.

Jamie picked one up and crunched. "How about carrots *and* cookies, superdude?"

Kevin reached dutifully for a veggie stick. "Is this what you guys do at your secret meetings? Drink beer and eat carrots?"

"Mostly." Jamie produced a soda from somewhere. "Until someone smart like you gives us something more complicated to think about."

Marcus watched the glances exchanged over young heads-the brain trust wasn't as relaxed as it looked. Good-his head was practically exploding with the implications of Kevin's latest theory.

Daniel looked at his phone. "Mike's coming. Aaron's got cranky twins on his hands, so he says to talk hocus-pocus without him."

Mike's large head showed up over the horizon. Close enough. Marcus prepared to draw the meeting to order, and then realized Jamie was watching his daughter, distracted.

Kenna stared, intent, at totally empty air-and then giggled like an octopus had attacked her ribs. She held up her arms, blew bubbles, and cooed.

Jamie grinned, still puzzled. "That's Kenna-speak for do it again."

Three grown men and a boy scholar watched as the same thing repeated itself two more times.

And then, very carefully, Kenna put her hands over her eyes-apparently not an easy feat at her young age. Marcus winced as she nearly poked an eye out. Mission accomplished, Kenna flung her hands out wide, and giggled so hard she fell over.

Daniel chuckled as he tipped her back upright. "I swear it looks like peek-a-boo."

Kevin grinned. "We have a Realm ghost."

With fifty half-trained coders on the loose, it was a wonder they didn't have a dozen. Marcus wondered idly if the ghost could be convinced to come entertain at the castle nursery.

Aervyn looked up from his Legos. "Can you see the ghost too, Kevin?"

Marcus intercepted the Lego rocket right before it made a lunar crash landing on Morgan's belly. "I think ghosts are invisible."

“Nuh, uh.” Aervyn set his rocket up for blast-off number two. “You just have to use your magic eyes to look instead of your real ones.”

He now had the rapt attention of every adult on the picnic blanket. Marcus glanced at Jamie and then magically scanned the air in front of Kenna, damn sure her father was doing the same thing.

Nothing. Jamie frowned and shook his head.

Daniel, brain moving faster than the average witch, leaned over and put his hand on the rocket, temporarily disrupting launch. “You can see a magical ghost? Playing with Kenna right now?”

“Yup.” Aervyn grinned. “Wanna see? You don’t have magic eyes, but I can show you.”

Jamie laid a hand on his trainee’s shoulder. “Show me too, superdude.”

“‘Kay.” Aervyn muttered a quick spell under his breath and started making rocket launch sounds. Daniel moved his hand.

Marcus felt the quick click of incoming mindlink. Apparently he rated a look at the ghost too. For a moment, the world looked distinctly weird-and then it refocused, back to normal. All except the web of energy dancing in front of Kenna.

Marcus had no idea which one of them slammed walls down around the child first-but neither baby nor ghost was very happy about it. Power danced against the circle’s edge from both sides.

And then the outer lights vanished.

Any idea what that was? Jamie’s mindvoice was as tense as Marcus had ever heard it.

It’s the ghost. Aervyn sounded distressed. *Don’t be mean next time- you’ll make it sad. It’s been playing with the babies for days now.*

Marcus felt some important organ in his gut tie itself into knots. *Babies? It plays with more than Kenna?*

Uh, huh. I think it likes Morgan best, though. Aervyn paused, thinking. *It went swimming with me in the lagoon once.*

Marcus grabbed his baby girl and tried to find the off switch for his overreact button. “It’s gone now, right?”

Aervyn nodded sadly. “You scared it away.”

It was Kevin who broke the stunned silence. “I don’t think it’s just any ghost.” He took a deep breath. “I think it was Evan.”

Denial ripped through Marcus’s head-and shattered against the certainty of his heart. His brother had always loved babies. And swimming.

***

Jamie looked at the crowd gathered in the castle dining hall. On most days, it would be a party.

Today, it was an unsteady, unfocused mob-when they needed a council of war.

Elorie walked up to his shoulder. “Rumors are flying thick and fast. What’s going on?”

He wasn’t sure anymore. “I’m pretty sure I only have parts of the story.” They were blind witches trying to describe the proverbial elephant.

She looked around the hall. Uneasy conversation buzzed, and the room practically crackled with energy looking for somewhere to go. “Someone needs to run the show-we’re never going to figure anything out like this.”

It was hard to disagree, but their resident general sat in a corner, brain stunned and eyes bleak. Not that Jamie could blame him-he’d literally just seen a ghost. “You’re pretty good at herding witches.”

She snorted. “More than pretty good.”

But it wasn’t hers to do-he could feel that as well as she did. Jamie sighed. Realm was his, even if his insides felt like they’d traveled through a whale already today. He pushed off the wall. One battlefield general, coming up.

“Wait.” Elorie grabbed his arm, intent on a stir moving through the crowd.

Jamie watched in astonishment as a quiet librarian walked to the front of the hall. And felt pride beaming from the mind of the woman standing beside him.

It seemed that a new general had arrived.

The hall quieted as Kevin climbed onto one end of the big table. He surveyed the room, books clutched to his chest, glasses crooked on his nose like they always were. The look he shot Marcus was pure nerves.

But when he spoke, his words were calm and sure-and pulled the eyes of every person in the hall. “We have a mystery. And if we want to solve it, we have to get way more organized than this.”

Elorie chuckled quietly. “That’s my witch.”

“We’re witches.” Kevin looked around the hall. “Well, some of us are. Witches have been trying to keep astral travelers safe for thousands of years.” He held up the books in his hand. “And after all that time, we still don’t know how to do it.”

He gulped. “Witches still die-and that’s not good enough.”

Jamie looked over at his baby girl, safe in Nat’s arms, and agreed with every cell of his being.

“We have to be smarter.” Kevin held up his book again. “I found

something today. And we saw a ghost." He waved down the murmurs in the room. "But there's more. Ginia has some weird lines of code."

Warrior Girl nodded as everyone turned her way.

Damn. Jamie kicked himself-he'd totally forgotten about that.

"There's more." Kevin's voice was implacable. "When Morgan came to Fisher's Cove, she had magic on her, but nobody knew what it was." He looked over at Elorie. "Net magic, but not quite."

Jamie could feel confusion circling as minds tried to connect the dots.

Kevin gulped a breath. "I think everyone in this room might know something that will help. We have to be scientists. We have to put our data together and see what comes out."

It was exactly the right battle call for a room full of geeks. Ten people at once started to offer their contributions-and for the first time, Kevin seemed to realize he was standing on a table in front of a hundred people.

Elorie grinned. "*Now* it's my turn."

She stepped forward, looking at Kevin with pride as she did. "Let's organize ourselves, folks. I need some of you to volunteer to go around the room and collect all the data. We'll put it into one place that everyone can look at." She glanced hopefully at Daniel, who grinned and started tapping on his tablet.

And then looked out at the room, wordless command in her eyes.

Jamie watched in awe as a coordinated dance of movement broke out in the hall. Damn-she was good.

***

Nell sat in silence, watching her husband work the dining hall. No one connected the dots better than Daniel Walker-and every coder in Realm was tripping over themselves to be helpful.

She also watched Kevin, glued to her husband's side.

Sophie, tucked in the same corner, followed her gaze. "Looks like The Hacker has taken on an apprentice."

Nell grinned. "Be ready for some turbulent teenage years, then." Her husband had not always been a pillar of virtue and light.

"Kevin could use a little encouragement in that direction." Sophie sighed. "He suffers from being the responsible twin."

They watched the quiet librarian walking in The Hacker's shadow, taking notes. Nell was fairly certain her husband wouldn't let him stay there. He was the best man in the universe at helping a child

to shine.

***

Marcus sat in the Witches' Lounge and stared at a plate of cookies.

He wasn't hungry.

They awaited the arrival of Daniel and Kevin, data collectors extraordinaire.

Marcus was terribly afraid he didn't need them. The dots were connecting all too well.

Morgan had arrived bathed in strange magic-but it was Elorie who had been able to see the spell lines best. Close to Net power-but not quite. Affinities. Dot.

Babies and ghosts and visitors in gold lamé. Marcus was no stranger to big magic-and all of those spells, regardless of how they'd been done, needed a circle-or a spellcaster in his prime. Dot.

Soldiers under the steps and teasing voices in his head. Perhaps simply random chance and fraudulent dreams. Or not. Dot.

He watched as the others filed in, helping themselves to cookies and quiet conversation.

He listened, in a surreal bubble, as Kevin carefully recited the facts they'd discovered. As minds and voices worked together to connect the dots. He let them say their pieces-it only confirmed what he already knew.

Dots and lines. Without Kevin's quiet bravery, he'd never have found the courage to look.

Mists that were dangerous, but not evil. Dot.

And a ghost that amused small girls with purple eyes. The last of the lines connected. Marcus shuddered. He looked down at the beautiful, warm, live girl sleeping on his chest. And then he looked up at the room, bubble gone. "I need to go to the mists."

Conversations stopped in mid-sentence. Moira turned gray.

He avoided her eyes, seeking those of the boy who had taught him of courage. "I need to find my brother and collect more data." He nodded at Kevin. "Of all of us, you've been the one least afraid to look-and you've found the most answers because of it."

"We know a lot." Kevin looked down at Morgan's dreaming face, and then up at Marcus, eyes pleading. "Maybe we know enough."

Marcus felt the terror behind his words. And the love. He tugged the unresisting boy in for a hug. "We might." His eyes circled around

the room, and finished with his aunt. “But I can’t take that chance.”

***

Sophie held her husband’s hand. Their part of this circle would be easy. Roots and rocks. It was Elorie, currently sitting with tiny Aislin in her arms, who would stand in harm’s way.

And Elorie who was fiercely arguing for that right. She glared at Jamie. “I’m the strongest Net witch we have. You can code anything you want between now and morning, but if Uncle Marcus is wandering off into the mists, I’m damn well going to be the one holding the rope.”

“We can put Net witches in each trio, manage magical affinity that way.” Jamie drew lines in the air as he talked, a witch diplomat at the end of his tether. “There’s no reason for you to take all the risk.”

“There is,” said Elorie softly. “We don’t have four Net witches of decent power over the age of twelve.”

She didn’t have to say anything more. Dissent in the room vanished. No one wanted witchlings anywhere near this circle.

Sophie closed her eyes, hiding tears. She didn’t want the sister of her heart anywhere near it either.

“How can we help?” It was Moira, voice quavery, who broke the silence.

“You can hold my baby girl.” Elorie touched the top of her daughter’s head, bald as a Nova Scotia beach boulder.

Sophie fretted at the sidelining of their oldest witch-and then realized what Elorie really asked. The grandmother and daughter of her blood, together. An anchor, rooted in ancient women’s magic.

The request brought a solidity to Aunt Moira’s aura that hadn’t been there for weeks. Mike squeezed her hand-he could see it too.

Elorie turned next to Nell and Jamie, trio leaders for fire and air. “I need you to spellcode safeguards. Whatever this circle touches, I want it to stay in the circle.”

Lots of nods-they’d have all the help they needed.

“We have an idea.” Devin stuck his hand up from over in the corner, Lauren in his lap. “We’re thinking it might be a good idea to include this sexy wife of mine in the water trio.”

Sophie blinked. Lauren was an impressive mind witch, but she didn’t have a stitch of water power.

For the first time since the meeting started, Marcus leaned

forward, eyes intent. “Why?”

Devin shrugged. “When Jamie was up there last time, he used water and air to move, but he cast out with his mind. We’re thinking that if we can blend Lauren’s power into the water stream, and Elorie can shovel it all up to you, you’ll be able to reach out both together.”

It broke every rule of circle magic. And every witch in the room was seriously considering the idea. Sophie felt Mike’s hand, linked in hers. “The bond between the two of you is strong-you’d know how to mesh energies by now.”

Lauren’s spluttered laughter decreased the tension in the room several degrees.

Sophie grinned. She hadn’t been thinking about *that* in particular, but it would help as well.

“It must still be three.” Moira sounded firm on that point. “Can you manage the water trio without Lizzie?”

“Yeah.” Devin sounded equally firm. “It’s bad enough we need to use Sierra.”

“It’s not a death circle,” said Marcus dryly. “I’m glad you all seem so sure I’m coming back.”

The unspeakable had finally been said.

And it was the oldest witch in the room who answered.

“Oh, you’re coming back.” Moira sounded like she was taking tea orders. “I’ve asked Morgan to fill a nappy at just the right time.”

Sophie watched in awe as a man about to face the fear that had shadowed his whole life laughed until tears ran down his face.

Over baby poop.

***

It was always thus, far back in history. Men prepared for war-and women wept behind them.

Moira leaned over her tea cup, willing it to hold her up. And willing the sense of dread in her heart to lessen just a little.

It wasn’t war that called Marcus. It was truth.

And fatherhood.

She didn’t turn as the back door slid quietly open and strong arms wrapped around hers.

She gripped Elorie’s hands, an old woman clinging to young life. “I can’t lose them both, darling girl. I just can’t.”

“We won’t.” Her granddaughter’s eyes were fierce. “We know how to hold him now. And he knows how to come back.”

It shamed her that she doubted. But the blood in her veins couldn’t forget. The mists had won far too often.

Chapter 21

Marcus stood on the rock promontory of Evan's beach, the first rays of dawn teasing the sky in front of him. The mists were strong still-but the light was coming. A time carefully chosen.

For him, it would be the time of seeking.

Either there was a place, somewhere in the in-between, where his brother cast spells and reached his magic back out into the world.

Or the mists were only pure, enveloping evil, as he'd believed all his life.

He needed to know. If he had an ally in the mists, he had to find out.

He could feel his circle behind him, standing strong in the pre-dawn light. Moira sat a half-mile away in her garden, Aaron and the twins with her. They'd all refused to leave Fisher's Cove.

They'd refused to leave Elorie.

Adam was with Kenna and Morgan, barricaded in Realm and protected by an irrationally large contingent of guardian angels.

Marcus was grateful for every last one of them.

He cast one last look over Evan's beach-and then turned to the circle at his back. Time to seek his brother's soul.

The traditional words of Devin calling water steadied the heart bashing around in his chest. He waited as the other elements joined the circle, a tight and competent flow of power woven by the strongest witches of his generation.

The four points complete, Elorie held her arms to the sky, pendant clasped in her right hand.

"I call the power that lives as mine
A web unending, living vine
That holds us all, woven as one,
Dark and shadows, mists and sun.
Touch the magic most like self
Form a bridge, a flying shelf.
Carry deep and carry back

The soul joined to this magic's track.
Hold him thus to me and four times three,
As I will, so mote it be."

He had a moment of surprise-it was a new call, and the imagery reached deep into his ribcage.

And then she poured power his direction, and all he could do was grab the lightning strike. It blasted through him, water through a sieve, punching holes in his magical skin as it went. He was a flea riding a fire hose, all sense of direction lost in the tumult. Bloody hell-flying through space like a damn rocket, and no idea if he was even headed the right direction.

We know which way east is, sent Lauren, humor not entirely masking the strain in her mental voice. *When the rocket ride ends, have your snorkel and fins ready.*

He struggled to figure out what part of the torrent was actually his power-and then decided it didn't matter. He gave over to the magic, reaching for the soul that was twin to his.

And ran headlong into the freezing mists of hell.

***

Marcus opened his eyes to a halo of light and a woman's dulcet voice singing a strange kind of lullaby.

Gods. If this was heaven, he'd taken a rather large wrong turn. He strained his brain to remember. A rocket ride, and then… nothing.

"Awake now, are you?" A face bent down closer to his. "I think he's conscious. You better come on over before he tries to pop me one."

Marcus was pretty sure Aunt Moira's rules about not hitting girls extended to heaven. Or wherever he was.

A young face swam into view. And this time, even in the shadow and light, he knew who it was. With all the longing of forty-three years, Marcus reached out to touch his brother.

And discovered he couldn't move at all.

"Nimwit. Hang on a minute." The boy with Evan's face waved his hand a couple of times. "Sorry, I had to hit you with a stasis spell when you panicked in the mists."

He hadn't panicked. He'd worked very, very hard not to panic.

Gingerly, expecting to shatter into a thousand pieces at any moment, Marcus sat up. And then did the thing he'd waited an eternity to do.

He grabbed his brother in a stranglehold of a hug and let the maelstrom he'd contained every day of those forty-three years go. Guilt and longing, love and rage, and the murderous need of a small boy who'd felt half his soul ripped away, all collided in the raging storm that had once been Marcus Buchanan.

He had no idea how long he sat there holding Evan. He knew only that when he let go, the cells of his body all had new neighbors-and a lake of tears dried on the ground around them.

If Evan's face spoke true, the tears weren't all his.

For a while longer, Marcus just looked, drained of the feelings that had always been his skeleton. "Funny." His voice sounded like it hadn't been used in a decade. And his nose was in desperate need of a hanky. "I spent so much of my life wishing for this moment. And not once did I think about what would happen next."

Evan rested his head on his knees, a simple movement that nearly drowned Marcus in memory again. "We have some time. And you have some questions."

The first leaked out of its own accord. "Why are you still here? In this place, whatever it is?" This place of gray and shadows and odd light.

Evan stared off into the distance. "I take care of the souls who come here."

Marcus looked at the sunny small boy beside him in horror. "But you're only a child."

Evan smiled, at once sad and amused. "That's how you see me-how you remember me. Physical appearances are mutable here. They reflect the hearts of those who look, or sometimes, how we see ourselves."

Marcus blinked. "How do you see yourself?"

Evan grinned, his eyes twinkling in that way they always had just before he got the both of them into a heap of trouble. "A blond-haired, blue-eyed version of you. We're getting old, bro."

We. A single word that arrowed straight for the bottomless pit of lonely he carried in his chest-forty-three years of "I"-and lightened it. Just a little.

A small hand joined with his.

Marcus looked around, willing the shakes away, and sensed movement in the shadows. There had been someone with Evan when he'd awakened. Voices. "Who are the others?"

"We're kind of like a way station for departed souls. Some stay here only moments. Others, for months or years."

Marcus watched as a beautiful woman floated out of the shadows, her feet moving in an intricate and beautiful dance. Light shone from her face.

“That’s Margie.” Evan smiled. “She got here after twenty years in a wheelchair and said she couldn’t wait for heaven to try on her dancing shoes.”

Her joy was palpable. “When did she arrive?”

“Just a few days ago. She’ll be leaving us soon.” A tinge of sadness leaked into his brother’s voice. “The happiest ones generally have the shortest stays.”

Marcus didn’t want to ask what that meant about a man who’d stayed forty-three years.

Two more of the shadows drew closer, the taller one singing the odd, tuneless lullaby Marcus remembered. Evan waved. “That’s Victoria and Davey. He’s our lost little waif. Vicki takes good care of him.”

Marcus studied the sad little boy clutching a stuffed Kermit the Frog nearly as big as he was. “What’s wrong with him?”

Evan shook his head. “We don’t know. He lost his magic crossing the mists-he’s a fire witchling, and fire can’t withstand the cold and wet of the journey here. He threw a three-day tantrum when he arrived and hasn’t said a word since. He just rocks and makes that high-pitched whining sound.”

Marcus could hear the sound now-manic bees laced with a little nails-on-chalkboard. An hour of it would drive a man to drink. “How long has he been here?”

“Seventeen years.”

The insanity of it nearly struck Marcus dumb. “You’ve been listening to that for seventeen years?”

“Nope.” Evan laughed and reached into his pocket for two odd yellow cylinders. “Earplugs.” He grinned. “And Vicki’s really, really hard of hearing.”

Thank the gods for small mercies.

“Come on.” Evan hopped to his feet. “Let’s take a walk.”

Marcus rose more slowly, surveying the unending gray. “Does it ever look any different than this?”

“No.”

It was a single word-but the longing that rose up in his brother’s soul nearly knocked Marcus flat. Evan had lived here forty-three years-and home was still a beach in Nova Scotia.

“Why?” The word was ripped from Marcus’s throat. “Why did you leave?”

“I don’t know.” His brother stopped, eyes infinitely sad. “I can’t ever remember. I only know that one day I was here, and I couldn’t go home.”

Horror iced Marcus’s veins. He slid down to the ground, reaching for a small boy to hold.

“Please.” Evan squirmed out of reach, a plea in his eyes. “Don’t think about that-it will drain the magic keeping you here.”

He couldn’t leave yet-too many questions unanswered. Marcus gulped air and tried to push away the heartrending image of a lost little boy alone in this unending abyss.

“It’s gotten better,” said Evan softly. “The last year has been a great gift. I’ve been able to come visit a little.”

Because of Net power. “The ghost in Realm.” And the mysterious alarms. Not danger. Evan. More of Kevin’s data points.

“Yeah.” Blue eyes twinkled. “The babies were always happy to see me. You, not so much.”

Pain seized Marcus’s heart again. “You came to see me?”

“Not often.” Sorrow weighted Evan’s entire body. “The mists were never strong enough. I could hear you calling.” He paused, gulping painfully. “I don’t think you could hear me answer.”

Never. Not once.

Evan punched him in the arm. “And then Net power happened and I could finally come and all you would freaking think about was turnips and kissing and how I was this stupid voice from your mind’s filing cabinet.”

Gods. “I’m sorry.” The words rasped out over a throat dry as dust.

His brother reached into a small sack and pulled out a bottle. “Here. Water.” His eyes twinkled again. “The one thing we have plenty of around here.”

Marcus drank and looked at the small boy who was his twin. And needed to say the words deep in his heart. “To be able to still laugh here-” he rasped in a breath, determined to get the rest out, “is an act of courage beyond measure.”

“It’s why I liked to visit the babies.” Evan looked down at the ground, chin wobbling with unshed tears. “Some days I was running out.”

Marcus regretted every day in forty-three years that he hadn’t sent laughter out into the universe. He would never make that mistake again.

“Morgan’s giggles are magic,” said his brother softly. “For both of us.”

Morgan. The reason he was here. “How did you do it? How did you get into Realm?” Where Evan could go, maybe the mists could follow.

“Net power rocks.” Evan’s grin was back. “When I go to the edge of the mists, I can see it.”

“They connect?” The thought scared Marcus silly.

“No.” His brother seemed very sure. “It’s like a bridge that’s missing the middle. But it gives me something to aim at.”

This was beginning to sound like one of the dumber pirate stunts they'd pulled as boys. "Just exactly how are you getting across?"

"I jump." Evan took a swig of water. "Missed a couple of times, but I have it pretty much figured out now."

A couple of stray dots connected in Marcus's head. "Wait. You said that fire witches lose their magic in the mists. What are you using to power all this?"

"The mists," said Evan, holding out his palms, a small energy flow moving between them. "The same way astral travelers are powered. I channel it much like fire power. It weaves and folds and wraps into spells-not happily, but it can be done." He put his chin back on his knees. "I've had a lot of time to practice."

A spellcaster in the mists. "It's how you sent Adele. And Morgan."

Humor flooded into his brother's eyes. "Adele was easy. Realm's this huge, gleaming fortress of Net power, and that fetching spell of Nell's is very handy." He grimaced. "Your front porch was harder."

Marcus had a hundred questions, but he could feel power lines tugging him now. They didn't have a lot more time. "Tell me about Morgan."

"She's the daughter of the only traveler I couldn't send home." Evan's mind drenched in guilt. "I think giving birth triggered emergence of her magic, and it was stronger than anything I've ever seen. Twice I managed to send her back, but the third time she came, Morgan was with her." He squeezed his eyes shut. "Her soul's tether had already snapped."

Marcus could read the rest. "She left the baby with you."

"I couldn't keep her. This is no place for a baby." Evan looked up, eyes hollow with grief. "Tell Morgan her mama's name was Emma, and she loved her very much."

The power tug was much stronger now. "How do I keep her safe?"

Evan shook his head. "I don't know." His grin was achingly lopsided. "But I know you're the smartest brother I've got."

Marcus grabbed his brother in a bear hug. "I'll come back."

"No." Evan held tight. "You can't-it's too dangerous. I won't always be here to catch you."

Protest died as Marcus realized how much magic was working to keep him safe.

Two small hands cupped his face-but the eyes belonged to a man who had lived centuries. "Do the one thing I can't." Evan's face crumpled. "Go home. Live."

***

Lauren clung to her husband. Marcus's sadness was awful. Evan's was worse.

She no longer tried to block it. Every word, every stitch of laughter and anger and grief-all telegraphed down the mighty rope of power and love that anchored Marcus into the world of the living.

Shutting it off might have weakened the rope-so she'd done her job and let what was happening in the mists rip her to shreds.

He was coming back to them now. She could feel the rope folding in on itself, filaments stretched to their limits settling back into less-abused forms.

Marcus was horribly, desperately sad-but some important part of him was no longer dead.

And then minds far stronger than hers were throwing up walls, and it all went blessedly silent.

***

Sophie practically crawled into the hot pool, wondering how she'd ever lived without one.

"You've exhausted yourself, lovey." Moira held out a hand. "Come. I've a wee bit of healing left in me. Let me clear your channels, at least."

It was a very sweet offer from a witch who had done yeoman's work already. "Mike took care of that much. I could use some of that tea, though." It smelled vaguely like skunk, which meant it was one of Moira's stiffer brews.

"Be careful what you wish for," said the grandmother of her heart, chuckling. "Lizzie steamed it up for us. She's got a heavy hand with the tisanes yet."

"Never fear." Nell set down a tray at pool's edge. "The chili is doctored too, but Aaron is willing to bet the inn that you can't taste it."

Aaron's chili was legend in Fisher's Cove-guaranteed to kill taste buds dead on contact.

"He's a good man." Moira held out her hands for the offered bowl. "His heart didn't waver for a moment as we sat in my garden holding those babies."

It was a good thing he hadn't seen his wife when the circle ended. Sophie kept her eyes on her chili. One of the reasons she was so exhausted was the healing push she'd shoveled into Elorie before

Aervyn had ported her to the garden.

"And any witch," continued Moira blandly, "who thinks I can't smell a healing spell at ten paces would be sorely mistaken."

Busted. "I couldn't send her back half conscious." For starters, one elderly healer would have done herself damage trying to fix it.

Nell sniffled in the corner, wiping tears away. "This chili's insane. It's making everything run."

Sophie managed a grin, grateful for the distraction. Aunt Moira hated it when they coddled her. "I thought fire witches liked spicy."

Nell just rolled her eyes.

"Not to worry, dear." Moira chuckled and began to spoon in her own chili. "Take a couple more bites and everything will go numb."

The easy banter was balm for Sophie's soul. It had been a brutally difficult circle.

Nell looked over, echoes of what they'd been through in her eyes. "How's Lauren doing?"

They'd all lived through the emotional earthquake when Marcus had first seen his brother. And then Lauren had battened down the hatches, forcing it to flow only through her. An act of enormous sacrifice, and one that still had her intermittently sobbing in Devin's arms. "It's going to take her a while to grieve." No one came through an experience like that unscathed. Living through sixty seconds of it had flattened the rest of them-Lauren had hung on for more than two hours.

And it had been Lauren who held Marcus's head after while he wept.

Sophie shook herself-she had to let go of it for a while. The babies were all safe, the rest of the circle was recovering nicely, and Marcus had two young girls pumping healing into him as he slept.

His heart had taken a devastating blow-but when they'd settled Morgan into his arms, he'd smiled. And told her that Uncle Evan loved her.

Grief, they could heal. Marcus had come back with the will to live-it had been stamped on every fragment of his soul.

Strong arms wrapped around her shoulders, and Sophie realized her own tears were dripping into the water. "Ah, my sweet girl," said Moira, her Irish thick. "We've forty-three years of tears to cry-but remember. Evan needs us to laugh."

It had been one of the few things Lauren had been able to get out past her sobs.

"He looks so much like Aervyn." Nell reached for Sophie's hand, cheeks wet, and not from the chili this time. "Just a little boy, alone in that awful place."

"He's not alone." Moira stroked their hair, the way she'd always

done. “Each of us is connected, one to the other. A great web of souls.”

“Those who have come before, those now, and those yet to come.” Sophie repeated the familiar words of the healer incantation, their meaning never more needed.

And hoped the guardian in the mists could hear them.

Chapter 22

The Hacker was up to something. Jamie leaned a little further out of the alleyway. And so was that blasted little librarian.

It was a partnership that had smart players in Realm quaking.

He snuck a little closer, hoping the soundproofing spell on his back was a good one-Kenna was babbling up a storm. *Not much of a skulker, are you, little girl?*

The mental giggles he got back were worth the risk of discovery. Her mind powers were growing every day. He squinted down the street at the two plotters-if he was really lucky, Kenna might decide to go mentally investigate what her uncle Daniel was up to. Nobody minded if a baby snooped in their heads.

A noise behind them had him spinning-only to discover Mike looking down at a tin can in disgust.

Jamie tried not to laugh-when you had a baby on your front, alley debris was a real hazard. “Morning.”

“Still?” Mike grimaced. “Somebody woke up at the crack of dawn.”

“Ouch.”

“S’okay.” Mike picked his way through the rest of the alley flotsam without incident. “Gave me time to work on that little forest diversion we talked about.”

The women were working on soothing Marcus’s heart the usual way-with food and time and love. The Fairy Godfathers had come up with a different plan. Well, except for Daniel, who seemed to have a second strategy brewing on the side. Four days ago, they’d launched a full-out attack on the third-ranked player in Realm.

Which had seemed like a nice, mild distraction until it made the second-ranked player in Realm really mad. Warrior Girl had promptly allied herself with a shell-shocked Marcus and made him choose between finding his game feet or getting rescued by a ten-year-old girl.

It had brought a lot of delight to Realm-and a lot of mad

scrambling-when the general had awakened.

Jamie checked the time-if the forest diversion was in place, the next move was on his shoulders. “Can you hold out another half hour for food, Kenna girl?”

She leaned forward and tried to eat his hair. He hoped that was an affirmative.

“Be careful.” Mike grinned. “Rumor has it Morgan was up in the night.”

Damn. They had an inside source-one of the nursery guards in Morgan’s castle had a weakness for spaghetti sauce. And as they’d very quickly figured out, Marcus had taken to walking Realm the nights Morgan was awake-leaving spell traps as he went.

Particularly grumpy spell traps-Jamie had lost a third of his stash to one while innocently taking a seat at the pub. “Any other news?” Mike was in charge of their spy network.

“Morgan’s trying to roll over, another alligator has been spotted in the moat, and Marcus was seen smiling before breakfast.”

The first smile, two days after he’d returned from seeing Evan, had been red-alert news. Now it only warranted a quiet bulletin. The rest of Mike’s information was more troublesome. Rolling was the first step to baby mobility, which scared any sane parent. And the alligators were a real problem-the darn things seemed to breed like magical bunnies. Jamie sighed and hitched Kenna a little higher on his back. “I’ll go check on the moat.”

Mike nodded down the street. “I’ll try to keep an eye on those two.”

Jamie snickered. “Watch out for tin cans.”

He walked off whistling. It was a good morning when tin cans and alligators were the biggest issues on his radar.

***

He had a problem. Marcus tugged on the part of Morgan’s outfit that was supposed to snap together and rolled his eyes. “Who’s been feeding you, girl-child?”

She was growing like a weed. And while he was perfectly happy to let her live in only a diaper until she went to kindergarten, doing so seemed to cause an influx of casually dropped-off gifts of clothing. Pink, frilly, five-hundred-snaps-and-ribbons-to-tie clothing.

Getting his girl dressed every morning was a basic act of self-defense.

He reached over into the basket that held her stash of clean outfits. And growled when he hit bottom. Surely it couldn't be laundry day again already.

An odd scuffling sound and whispers in the hallway had him turning. A couple more bangs and knocks, and then Lizzie pushed open the door with her bottom, backing in with a wagon handle in one hand, a rope in the other. Aervyn pushed the other end of the wagon, grinning. "See, I told you she was awake."

Marcus watched in stupefied silence as the saddest excuse he'd ever seen for a wagon limped into the room. Followed by a goat.

A *goat*.

"Not a chance," said Marcus gruffly. "This is a castle, not a barn."

"He's my pet." Lizzie stuck out her bottom lip. "We thought Morgan might like to play with him while you helped us fix our wagon."

The wagon needed to go to the junk heap. Three of its four wheels tilted drunkenly, and the fourth one appeared to be missing entirely. "I'd be happy to find you a new wagon. And the goat has to go." Even castles with stray alligators in their moats had to have some standards.

"We need *this* wagon." Aervyn's eyes twinkled. "It's for a disguise."

It was his brother's face, right down to the mischief in the making. Grief kicked Marcus in the ribs and stole his breath.

It had been a week. The intolerable sorrow wasn't a constant companion anymore-he owed Evan that much. But it still cracked his heart too many times a day to count.

Aervyn climbed into his lap. Somehow the child always knew when he needed a small boy to hold. Marcus held tight to the warm, strong little body-and found his breath again. "Well then, we'll see what we can do." He looked over at Lizzie. "But the goat needs to go."

The grin Lizzie shot at Aervyn was pure female satisfaction.

And Marcus realized, far too late, that the goat had simply been a way to get the wagon in the door.

If Lizzie ever earned her way to the top level of Realm, he was going to hang up his spellcubes and retire.

He felt laughter tickling his soul-and hoped Evan could hear.

***

Nell sat down on the sand beside Elorie, her stomach making

loud, rumbling noises. “If you ever decide to kick Aaron to the curb, we’d be happy to let him move in with us.”

Elorie laughed. “I think he’d be claimed before he made it out of Fisher’s Cove.” She started unloading the picnic basket. “He said something about fried chicken in here.”

No wonder the basket smelled like seventeen kinds of awesome. Nell reached over to help. “Think we’re done?”

Her partner looked up and down the beach. “I want to take one more walk around all the wards after we eat. Just to be sure.”

They’d already walked the lines three times, but Nell wasn’t arguing. She took the lid off the container of chicken and nearly wept. “If Witch Central finds out about this, you guys are going to have to add a second wing to the Inn.”

“Tell that to my husband.” Elorie rolled her eyes. “He’s been talking about having regular Friday night chicken dinners. Here and in Realm.”

“He’s totally insane.” Nell grinned and contemplated crispy golden goodness. “We’ll be lining up halfway to California.”

“I think that’s the idea.” Elorie touched her pendant gently. “We all have our own ways of trying to build comfort and ritual into this new way of life. My husband believes in the power of food.”

It wasn’t just Marcus whose life had been upturned by the full-time move to Realm. The gravitational center of Fisher’s Cove had also shifted. And a small fishing community steeped in tradition was doing its very best to rebalance. Villagers entirely unused to technology were braving transport spells to come visit Marcus’s online abode, bearing pies and berries and glasses of tangy lemonade.

And several dozen coders had found themselves hijacked to the beach one night, swept up in a heady mix of Celtic fiddling, lobster, and old-fashioned hospitality.

They journeyed to Realm, the people of Fisher’s Cove-and they kept the home fires burning bright.

Nell bit into her chicken and figured they had some awfully good weapons. This was the kind of food people dreamed about. “It’s a good idea. We need to find him some sous chefs.”

“Good luck with that.” Elorie chuckled. “I think the last witch he tried to deputize was Sean. It didn’t end well.”

Maybe Aaron needed a little help selecting his apprentices. “He might try Sierra. She’s responsible, safe with a knife, and she could use some cooking lessons.” The triplets reported a lot of boxed mac and cheese during their frequent visits.

Elorie nodded slowly. “That could work, especially the cooking lessons part. I like it.”

Nell grinned. It was good to get back to the normal, garden-

variety witch meddling. She reached for another drumstick. “Anything else to solve while we eat?”

“Teach Sean your air-weave-loop trick?” Quiet pride radiated from the woman responsible for witchling training in Fisher’s Cove. “He has the skills, I think, and some tightly controlled magic would be good for him.”

Nell had plenty of experience with boys of Sean’s variety. “How about I teach Kevin first?”

Elorie blinked. “You think he can do it?”

It would be a stretch-but yeah, she did. And if the last couple of weeks had taught her anything, it was that the quiet twins should never be underestimated. “Only one way to find out.”

“Ha.” Elorie dug in the basket for napkins, highly amused. “Sean will practice until his magic runs dry if his twin has a trick he can’t do.”

Nell grinned. That was the idea. “The power of a dare.” And Kevin wouldn’t have to say a word.

Elorie quieted, her mind suddenly solemn. “It’s what Evan did, isn’t it?” She sat a moment, arranging her words. “This village has spent more than forty years trying to get Marcus back into the land of the living.” Her smile was a mix of wistful and impressed. “And all it really took was a dare from his twin.”

Nell looked around the beach-and hoped she and Elorie were adding one more strand to keep the dare alive. Evan had told Marcus to go home and live.

They were trying to make the first part of that possible.

***

Once, long ago, he’d sat in her gardens, just as he did now. Moira watched her nephew, sitting in the castle’s cornflowers, playing with a pile of shiny rocks.

And a set of small, green toy soldiers.

Her heart caught. Oh, Evan. Her soul ached for the boy who couldn’t come to play-and rejoiced for the one who finally had. “Good afternoon. Can an old lady join you?”

Marcus only scowled a little.

She took that by way of greeting and made her way through the flowers. “I heard wee Morgan has figured out how to roll over.”

He nodded glumly. “Sad, but true. She gets in enough trouble as it is.”

She had a lot of mobile helpers. Moira reached over and rescued the flower the baby had trapped in her pudgy toes. “No eating that one, sweet girl-it’ll give you a tummy ache.”

Marcus continued to move shiny pebbles and toy soldiers aimlessly in the dirt.

She knew the stages of grief. And could find joy in him finally moving through them, even if it hurt her to the core to watch. She reached out and touched his hand. “Tell me about my boy.”

Her nephew’s body jerked. “He lives in a gray hell and he can’t leave.”

“I know.” She’d had a long and tearful cup of tea with Lauren. “And the fierce injustice of it makes me want to kick a hole in the sky.”

Marcus looked up, face full of surprise.

“Aye.” She pulled dead petals off a flower with far more force than necessary. “You’re not the only one who would like to throw a witch-sized temper tantrum. One big enough to blast light into every corner of that awful gray.”

“We can’t.” His voice carried the full weight of that helplessness. “But I really appreciate the offer.”

“It’s not for you that I’d try.” Moira waited until he looked up. “I’d give anything to hold him on my lap, just one time, and tell him that I loved him. How proud I am of the man he’s become.”

“I forgot to tell him.” Tears swam in her nephew’s eyes.

“My dear boy.” She reached for his cheek, her own tears threatening. “You most surely didn’t. The two of you never needed words.”

It comforted his bruised heart-she could see it.

His fingers traveled again, a winding path over soldiers and shiny rocks. Pieces of home.

She picked up one of the pebbles. Evan had always loved them.

His hand wrapped around one of the soldiers. “This isn’t home,” he said softly. “It’s an amazing thing everyone’s done for us, and it’s keeping Morgan safe…”

But it wasn’t home. And while she sat in the flowers of her real garden every day, and drank tea at her kitchen table every night, he stayed here with the child he loved.

She closed her eyes and hoped Nell and Elorie were almost finished. Marcus had finally put his heart’s roots in the soil of Fisher’s Cove. It was time to nourish them.

Chapter 23

Escape.

Marcus climbed out of the car and breathed in the tang of salt, letting the glorious emptiness wash over his soul.

Alone.

Well, except for his sidekick.

After a week trapped in Realm, they had both earned this. They had every precaution dozens of witches could devise, a car filled with every baby item ever made, and thirty minutes of freedom.

Evan had told him to go home and live. Well, this was home, the happy and the sad of it.

He walked around to the back door and bent in, grinning as Morgan blew bubbles and tried to grab his hair. “Ready to play on the beach, girl-child?”

Marcus touched Elorie’s pendant around his neck. He could get them back to Realm at any whiff of trouble. As could any of the witches standing guard all over the village. And there wasn’t going to be trouble. The day was bright and sunny, Morgan had already slept like a rock, and he’d swaddled her in twenty-five warding spells.

Just half an hour. A moment to say hello-and perhaps goodbye.

Then he’d go back to the fortress that kept his girl safe.

With quick hands, he wrapped up Morgan in Aunt Moira’s latest baby blanket creation-this one swirling shades of purple. “Come on out, munchkin. And when you learn to talk, maybe you can explain to me why the women of the world insist on matching everything to your eyes.”

All she had in answer was a particularly wet raspberry.

No matter. Hecate herself couldn’t make him admit it out loud, but the purple was growing on him.

He drew the line at glitter, however. A man had to have his standards.

Tucking Morgan in one arm, he started unloading the trunkful of supplies required for an outing at the beach. He spent two useless

minutes trying to fight the umbrella out one handed-and then rolled his eyes. The entire half hour could easily be spent unpacking. He looked down at his content companion. “What do you think, baby girl-can you manage not to poop for thirty minutes or so?” He was pretty sure the diapers were at the bottom of the trunk pile.

He hoped her raspberry was an affirmative one.

Feeling strangely unburdened, Marcus settled Morgan into her pouch. “Let’s travel light, then. You want to walk or laze around in the sun?”

For once, she seemed easy with either choice, and his old and cranky legs voted for lazing. Carefully, Marcus wound through the boulder field between the car and a long stretch of sand. In his boyhood, he’d barely noticed the rocks. Now his balance was rather more precarious.

Marcus looked down at his old-man shoes. And felt an odd sense of adventure meld into his general good mood. It had been years since he’d gone barefoot.

Hell, it had probably been decades.

With considerably more effort than it had taken in his youth, Marcus danced around until his feet were naked. “Well, that was about as graceful as a bull walrus.” He peered down at his pale toes. “And those look like fish bait.” Decades-old fish bait.

His toes scrunched up-he’d forgotten how cold the rocks could be on a Nova Scotia June morning. Wimpy old fart. It was, however, a far easier task to hop across the remaining stretch of boulders.

Problem number two showed up when he took the final hop onto the sand.

The very cold, wet sand. High tide-damn. He offered Morgan a knuckle to chew on, distracted. “Looks like we have a bit of an impediment to our lazing around.” And he hadn’t escaped civilization just to have his feet turn into sand popsicles.

Morgan gave his finger a particularly good chomp. Marcus chuckled. “What are you, a baby dinosaur?” Probably not. Too much drool-her onesie was half soaked already. With a quick finger wave, he activated the portable quick-dry spell on his iPhone. Bless Aervyn and his endless fire power.

Endless fire power.

Marcus grinned. “One patch of warm, dry sand, coming up.” He pushed several buttons on his phone. Using the same spell ten times in a row wasn’t the most elegant way to solve a problem, but it was working. The sand under his toes heated nicely.

Grateful for small pleasures, Marcus pulled Morgan out of the pouch and sank down onto the now-toasty circle of beach. “Welcome to tropical paradise, baby girl.”

He chuckled as her bare toes slipped out the bottom of the blanket. “Want to feel the sand under your feet, do you?” The baby manual probably frowned on such things, but he was in far too good a mood to care.

He unwrapped her little sausage of a body and laid her down on the sand-and then winced as she promptly wiggled around in paroxysms of happiness. Dang it. Sand probably wasn’t all that easy to get out of baby hair.

Ah, well.

Feeling oddly mischievous, he picked up a handful of sand and trickled it over her feet, grinning in victory as her giggles rolled out over the sand. “Like that, do you?”

He loved watching her laugh-her entire body got into the act. And if it was laughter Evan wanted to hear, Morgan’s could melt the earth and sky. One more time, he scooped up sand in his hand…

And froze as magic exploded in front of his eyes.

***

Marcus grabbed the tiny, lifeless girl lying on the sand, the tornado of horror in his mind a tiny wind compared to the keening wail in his heart.

No warning. No alerts.

Not asleep. Just gone.

Frantically, he reached for his phone and the life-saving Realm transport spell-and then realized the obvious. Her soul was gone. Moving her body to Realm now would kill her.

She was so still. So cold.

Just like Evan.

The helpless, anguished fury of a small boy took over Marcus, body and soul. He sank into a heap on the sand, the babe he loved as his own curled in his arms. Not again. Oh, gods, not again.

The tortured moan that escaped his lips was all he had left. Marcus closed his eyes-and wished for the mists to take him too. Morgan would need company. The mists would be terrifying for such a tiny girl.

Don’t be a stupid-head.

Marcus’s eyes shot open, seeking. *Evan?*

Nothing. Empty silence.

And a tiny, insistent thread of hope stirring in his heart.

He wasn’t alone. This time, *he wasn’t alone*. He wasn’t a small boy

with barely-born magic and a circle too far away to matter.

Marcus charged to his feet-grown men didn't fight sitting down. Strength burning back into his limbs, he tucked Morgan into her sling against his heart. It would keep her body warm-and he needed two hands to type.

Thumbs flying, he blasted an emergency alert to every witch in virtual earshot. He needed a circle. *Now.*

Barely pausing to breathe, he tossed the Realm spell library, activating spells as fast as his fingers could move. A rooting spell to hold him while he went after Morgan. More heat. And cornflowers. He needed cornflowers. When some appeared in his hand, roots, dirt, and all, he could have wept. Aervyn.

And then the pendant around his neck blazed, white hot.

Help was on the way. It was time to go find his girl.

Wait! Jamie landed on the beach in front of him, breathless. "I'll go. I'll cast. You do point on air, just like last time. The circle's forming in Realm right now."

It shamed Marcus that he considered it, even for a moment. The mists still terrified him. "No. It's mine to do." He shuddered in a breath and wrapped his arms around the still, cold bundle on his chest. For Morgan, he could do this.

She was his.

Jamie met his eyes-witch to witch. Father to father. And saw whatever he needed to see. "We'll have your back." And then he was gone.

Marcus wrapped his hand around his pendant, feeling the gathering power. The steady, deep drumbeat of the earth trio, already linking with fire's heat. They'd keep his precious girl's body warm. The pulse and flow of water, ready. And then air linked in. Jamie was in place.

They were ready. Marcus reached his arms to the sky, calling the powers his to claim. And froze as a fifth power stream joined in.

It's Elorie, Ginia, and Kevin. Lauren's mental voice rang calm and sure in his mind. *They're feeding you Net power.*

Impossible. Marcus punched out in fury. *Circles have four elements. Five is out of balance.*

Jamie says it can be done. The dare was clear.

Impudent wench. Marcus growled-and then he understood. And with understanding came charging hope. Net power would give him real magic up there in the mists. Again, he reached for the sky-and this time, for the child in his arms as well.

"I call on water, call on air,
These feeble magics mine to bear
I go to find the child I love

From power below to power above.
With my circle, five times three
As I will, so mote it be."

Power exploded up through his channels, a torrent of sheer energy. Marcus wove madly, trying to bring five raging flows into balance. For a man who'd spent his whole life managing four, it was a hell of a brain stretch.

And it wasn't right. He could feel it. The circle wobbled, tilted on an axis of uneven power.

His mind raced, seeking a solution. Jamie said it could be done.

And then he had it. *Kevin! Niece! Warrior Girl!* Marcus mindsent what he needed, praying it made sense.

The circle's power flows wobbled dangerously, trio leaders straining to right the tilt-and then snapped into place. Four streaming columns of energy, wrapped in a dancing weave of Net power.

Net power wasn't a fifth element. It was the energy that united them, held them together in community. Rooted them.

And it was the power that would bring Morgan home.

He was not alone this time.

Quickly now, Marcus leaned back into the streaming power flows, ignoring the aching shear as soul separated from body.

His mind already sought lavender eyes. *Morgan. Baby girl, let me see you.* The mists closed in more quickly this time-thick and green and full of evil.

No. The mists weren't evil. They just *were*.

Marcus clenched mental fists and imagined them as ocean waves or tornado winds. Mighty. Sometimes deadly. But not evil.

I'm coming, sweet girl. He tried to hold an image of her in his mind. The ethereal, fairylike waif that flitted in front of his eyes annoyed the hell out of him. His Morgan was no fairy. *It's cold up here, silly widget, and I bet you've kicked off your socks again.* Her image firmed up. Better. He kicked, the streaming power of the circle at his back. *I bet you'd like a bottle of that mysterious white stuff, and a nice walk on the beach.*

Beach. They'd been on the beach.

He felt humor shining through the fear. *You've still got sand in your hair, don't you*? *Good, solid Nova Scotia beach sand, up here in the mists with you.* Her face danced in his mind now, real and solid and blowing raspberries.

Raspberries.

Marcus pulled on every ounce of mind power he'd ever had, his fingers madly weaving a broadcasting spell with Net magic, and held the sound of Morgan's best and loudest raspberry in his mind. *I bet you can't do that again.*

This time, it wasn't just his head that heard her reply.

Mind and heart wide open, Marcus grabbed the power of fifteen willing witches and hurtled toward his baby girl.

***

She was warm.

Before he ever opened his eyes, Marcus knew his beautiful girl was just fine.

She was warm-and blowing raspberries.

He nuzzled into her soft hair. "I bet your uncle Evan found those rather amusing." He hadn't seen his brother-but when he'd reached Morgan, Evan's presence had been thick around her. Protecting. Calling.

Sending the sound of one small girl's raspberries through the mist.

With infinite care, he touched the sand in her wispy hair. And dragged his eyes away long enough to thank the beach that had helped call her back.

It wasn't the sand his eyes discovered.

Every witch he knew stood on Evan's beach, holding love for him and his precious girl in their eyes.

This. It was *this* that had called them home. He'd been lonely his whole life, surrounded by this sea of love.

Marcus nuzzled the bright-eyed baby in his arms-and knew he had one more job to do. Carefully, on legs still shaking from more than one kind of journey, he made his way over to the woman who had always been his rock.

Reaching for Aunt Moira's hand, he looked out at those gathered. "If I can ask for your help one more time. I know how to keep her safe. Forever. All our travelers."

Not one word was spoken. Not a single question asked. Just every person on the beach, quietly taking a step forward.

The matriarch of them all squeezed his hand a little more tightly.

Marcus sought the eyes of the two whose permission he needed. "It will make a royal mess in Realm."

Jamie nodded, Kenna eating sand in his arms. *Whatever you need.*

Nell's mind spiked amusement. *We'll put you in charge of the clean-up crew.*

Wordless, Marcus sent out the image of what he wanted to create, into the minds and hearts of those who would help him build it. Some

nodded. Some smiled.

But it was the old woman beside him who understood best. “We won’t lose any more.” Moira patted his arm, tears streaming down her cheeks. “There will be no more Evans. They’ll be able to come home.”

His own tears threatening, Marcus reached out for the closest hand. He was tired-but it was time.

“Wait.” Elorie spoke quietly and stepped out of the crowd. “I found this on the beach yesterday. It matches Morgan’s eyes.” She held up a small pendant, lavender sea glass dangling from a simple silver chain.

It was the prettiest damned anchor he’d ever seen. Carefully, he slipped it around his daughter’s neck-and chuckled as she tried to eat it. “I hope you waterproofed it.”

Elorie’s eyes sparked with amused fire. “I did. And several other things you haven’t even thought to worry about yet.”

Morgan blew another raspberry and tried to catch the shiny toy around her neck.

Marcus reached for Elorie’s hand. “I could use your love of hearth and home and safety, niece.” She nodded, confused, but willing.

He searched out her husband. “Imagine your best scones, if you would. Blueberry ones, dripping in butter.”

Aaron blinked in surprise. “Why scones?”

“Because.” Marcus swallowed as his breath hitched. Because those were the ones Evan missed most. “Because those are the reasons we come home.”

Understanding lit in eyes all over the beach. “I need you all to let me borrow your visions of home.”

Lizzie offered up sword fights and her favorite doll. Nell, the vision of sweet, sleeping children, and Nat sent a haze of green serenity and an endless cup of tea. Kevin and Sean pictured each other. Home, in all its manifestations.

He turned to Aunt Moira and Sophie. “A rooting spell, please.” They held out their hands, spell already made.

They’d always understood “home” far better than he did.

Only one request left. And this time he knew enough about a parent’s love to ask for permission first. His mind reached for Nell’s, his question ready.

She blinked in surprise. *That doesn’t seem dangerous.*

The magic, no. But not for the world did he want to lay this burden on another child’s shoulders. *If it doesn’t work, I don’t want her to feel responsible.*

Ah. Understanding hit Nell’s mind-and gratitude. Silence for a long moment. And then a quiet nod. *She’ll be okay. Her head’s not quite as hard as yours.*

He snorted-and sought the blonde curls he needed. He didn't have to look far. They were currently blowing magical bubbles at the child in his arms. His breath hitched again. He couldn't ask this of such a sunny heart. Maybe Elorie.

Elorie can't code. Nell's voice was brisk and solid. *My girl's the Net witch you need, and you do her a disservice if you think her heart can't handle this.* Mama pride came with every word.

He crouched down in front of Ginia. "Warrior Girl, I need a really big favor."

She blew another bubble Morgan's way. "Sure."

In words as simple as he could make them, he explained what he needed.

She leaned back on her heels, thinking a minute. "Okay. But it'll cost you."

Shock hit the beach. Magic never came with a price tag. Ever.

Marcus blinked. "Name it."

"When we rule over Realm," her whole face twinkled with mischief, "you'll wear a pink tiara."

A great, astonished guffaw rocketed up from somewhere way down in his toes-and joined with the tumult of laughter rolling over the beach.

Ginia gripped his hands tightly, eyes warrior bright. "*That's* for Uncle Evan."

He stared, for a long moment-and then reached his arms out to the crowd on the beach. Magic stormed into his channels, power of every kind riding a monstrous wave of laughter-laced love.

Marcus planted his feet firmly in the enduring sands of his home and began to cast the spell of his life.

It wasn't only Morgan he worked for now. Warrior Girl had connected the last dot.

Marcus wove the magics, gentle and fierce, into a spell rope. One end he threw at Ginia, to be anchored into all the love and community and roots Realm could hold. The other, he tossed into the astral plane-and trusted his brother to do the rest.

Chapter 24

When the weight of forty-some years slid off your shoulders, even old women felt rather spry. Moira walked lightly through the informal party in her garden, smiling at friendly faces left and right.

No one wanted to leave.

She took a turn into her cornflower patch, graced by a rather large hole in the middle. She chuckled and handed a cup of tea to the person trying to fix it. “I really do need to give that boy of yours a lesson or two about harvesting flowers.”

“Good luck.” Nell rolled her eyes. “Ginia calls him the garden monster. Apparently her herbs live in terror of small-boy invasions.”

Herbs weren’t known for their flexibility. Moira settled in a chair by Sophie and motioned Nell into a third. Even very spry old ladies needed to rest their feet occasionally, and she really didn’t want a fire witch trying to fix her flowers.

Sophie smiled, fingers sending one last spell into the cornflowers. “Are Marcus and Morgan sleeping?”

Aye, and it had done her heart good to see the two of them curled up together. “I used a light sleep spell on wee Morgan-her daddy needed a nap, and he wasn’t going under while she was still awake.”

“He should sleep for a week.” Nell leaned back and yawned. “That was some way fancy spellcasting he finished with, and he was barely standing after pulling Morgan back from the great beyond.”

All true, but you didn’t interfere with a man who had finally found the thing he was born to do. “So he’s set up a path of safety out of the mists, has he?” She appreciated a complex spell as well as the next witch, but she lacked Nell’s skill in parsing them.

“Yup.” Nell looked over at her smallest son, currently deep in saber bashing with young Lizzie. “He used the affinity of Net and astral power and basically wove a bridge between the astral plane and Realm.”

With all the forces of hearth and home calling their travelers back to this side. Moira felt her tears welling up again. The man who had

taken forty-three years to find home had rooted the entire astral plane as well. “And our Evan will set guarding spells at the other end.” She shared Marcus’s faith in the brother neither of them could see.

Sophie raised an eyebrow. “Do we need to be worrying about this end?”

Moira wished with all her heart the answer was yes. “No. Souls who have no tether can’t come back-they’ve no bodies to return to. Realm is safe.”

Sophie smiled, eyes full of empathy. “I was more worried about inquisitive witches messing around on this end. The citizens of Realm have been known to cause mischief on occasion.”

Oh, my. Moira frowned. That was a rather large hazard, and one she hadn’t considered.

Nell’s grin was quick-and fierce. “The best hacker in the world is on the job.”

All well and good, then. “He’ll enjoy the challenge, your Daniel. There’s a man who still needs plenty to do to stay out of trouble.”

“Nice.” Jamie ported into the center of their little chat, Kenna under his arm like a football. “The man’s going to be coding for weeks, and nobody’s so much as offered him a cookie yet.”

Moira was entirely sure the latter was false. “Eavesdropping again, are you?” She held out her arms for Kenna.

“Nope.” Jamie grinned. “There’s a pirate war breaking out any minute. I’m recruiting.”

Nell raised an eyebrow. “Who’s the other team captain?”

“Marcus.” Jamie waved his sword suggestively. “I think we can take him-he’s still asleep.”

Moira smiled, heart entirely full. Pirate war had always been Evan’s favorite. It was the right way to say goodbye.

***

Marcus shifted and held his girl-child a little tighter. Part of him knew this was a dream-but even now, the mists sent quiet echoes of fear skittering in his heart.

A soft light drifted to his shoulder, emanating peace.

He breathed, and realized the mists were oddly quiet. “Evan?”

Silence.

A shape drifted by in the mist. A soul, Evan had said, passing through. Marcus watched as another soft light took up residence beside the new arrival.

The lights were new.

Quietly, he drifted, watching. Three more shadows in the mist. Three more lights. Company on the journey.

And now, Marcus knew what it was that he saw.

The guardian of the mists had gone-and left magical escorts behind.

One last time, Marcus reached out for the mind of the brother he would always miss. And sent love.

Thank you!

I hope you've had a wonderful time immersed in my witches:-).

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